NF

ISSUE #51: THE KILLER CAREER OF SUDA51

SUPER MARIO 3D WORLD + BOWSER'S FURY

RETROSPECTIVE:
KILLER7

MONSTER HUNTER RISE

CHARACTER PROFILE:
TRAVIS TOUCHDOWN

NEW POKÉMON SNAP

INTERVIEW:
51 QUESTIONS FOR SUDA51

AMONG US

LOST IN UNTRANSLATION:
FATAL FRAME IV: MASK OF THE …LIPSE

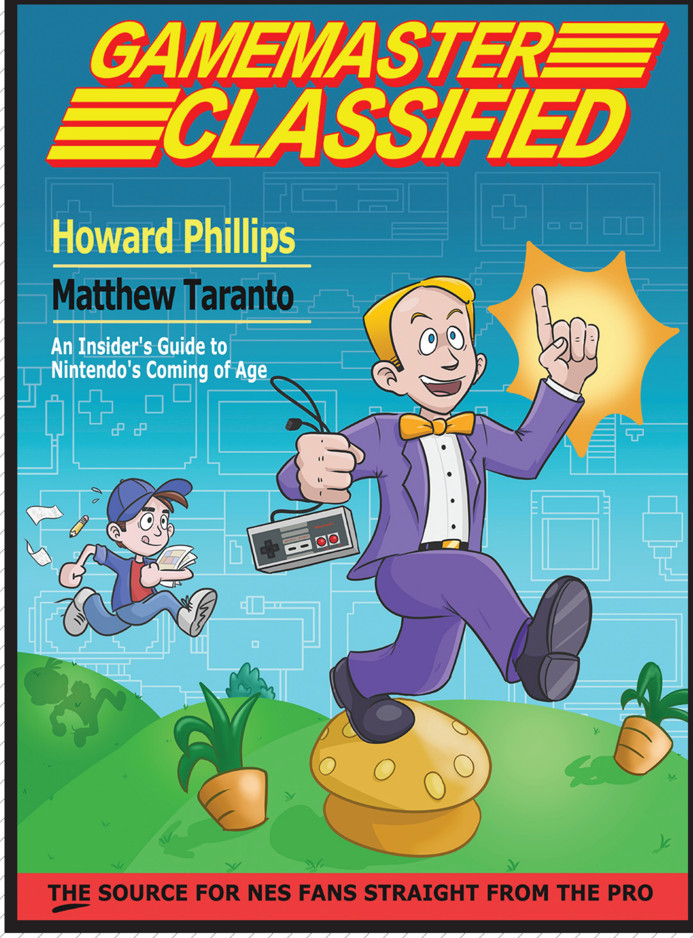
NEW FROM THE NF CREW

YOU CAN COUNT on the Nintendo Force to provide fresh reading material for you in magazine form every two months, but you should also be aware of a couple of new books on the horizon too!

First up, comic master Matthew Taranto is teaming up with Nintendo's legendary game master Howard Phillips for a tell-all tome called Gamemaster Classified! Howard was the public face of Nintendo in America during the '80s and into the early '90s, and he famously starred in Nintendo Power's Howard & Nester comics through that magazine's first few years. He'll be offering all-new behind-the-scenes insights into his time at Nintendo in this book, and Matthew will be providing the artwork, as well as his own perspective of being a kid who grew up in the 8-bit era! The book has been funded via Kickstarter and is due to debut in early 2022.

Meanwhile, more Mega Man fun is on the way from the dynamic duo of David and Nadia Oxford! They previously created the Mega Man Robot Master Field Guide, which we highlighted in this same space last year. Now, it's time for the X series equivalent! The Maverick Hunter's Field Guide will be an art encyclopedia providing profiles on all the many "Maverick" bosses of the Mega Man X series, as well as other prominent heroes and villains like Zero and Sigma. Like its predecessor, it's being published by Udon, and it's set to ship this August.

Please consider supporting both new books! Matthew, David and Nadia all do wonderful work, so I've already got my copies reserved! **— LUCAS**



ISSUE #51: THE KILLER CAREER OF SUDA51

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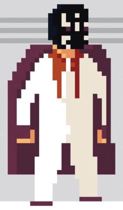

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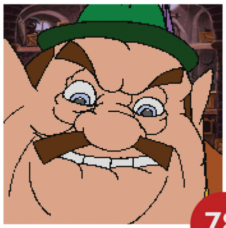
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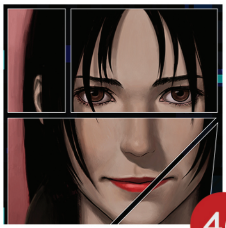
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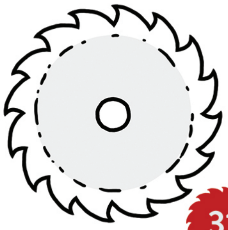
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ON THE COVER

Suda51 has inspired us to go for kind of a punk approach to the cover art this time, so apologies to anyone thrown off by the untraditional logo placement! No More Heroes III is the game in the spotlight this time, but it's serving to represent more than just itself – it's the poster child for Suda51's entire career thus far! Since he's a creator who almost always makes M-rated games, be advised that there is discussion of several such titles ahead in this edition. But all language is kept family friendly, with *[bleep]* used as needed!

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MARCH/ APRIL 2021

INBOX

SPOTLIGHT ON SUDA

Welcome, everyone, to a very special issue of Nintendo Force! Are you surprised it even exists? If so, I wouldn't blame you. Theming an entire issue around the career of a developer who doesn't even work at Nintendo may seem like a diabolical curve-ball, but it actually falls right in line with the spirit of NF. Like Goichi Suda (a.k.a. Suda51), our little publication is a scrappy underdog that, through a bold combination of heart and hard-headedness, "forced" itself into existence, despite longshot odds and plenty of naysayers.

Also like NF, Suda makes a habit out of using his unique anti-mainstream machinations to fill the gaps in the gaming land-scape left by Nintendo and other big-name game publishers. If Nintendo put out a string of family-friendly party games, he'd put out a single-player, M-rated action title that uses motion controls in unabashedly family-unfriendly ways. If the AAA industry became obsessed with gritty games about grumpy men shooting things, he'd release a game about a sparkling, giggling high school cheerleader with a chainsaw. When everyone else is going by the book, he takes a step back and writes his own, just as we here at NF decided to write our own magazine, right after Nintendo turned away from the business and the world at large declared that print was dead.

But going against the grain doesn't mean pushing against game players themselves. Every step of the way, Suda has always worked to produce the most honest, well-made products possible, even when working exclusively for niche audiences. Again, just like Nintendo Force! It really is like we were separated at birth.

In fact, we've been connected with Suda for more than a little while. It was back in 2019, shortly after he turned 51, that we first starting talking to Suda about making this issue. Even though it took a while to get it together, it's been a match made in "heaven," and it makes us "smile" knowing that you're finally reading it today. Just as Nintendo Power helped introduce the Western world to Suda's games with their Killer7 issue in 2005, we're hoping that this issue helps to newly expose a whole new generation to Suda's unique life story and creative vision.

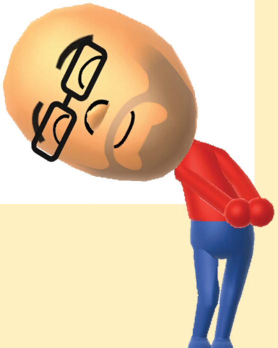
Wait one minute here folks! Isn't it a little strange that it's been almost exactly 16 years since Suda's first cover story in a full-sized Nintendo magazine, and that Nintendo Force itself just turned 8 years old? Hmm, let's see here, 16 divided by 2 is 8, which is a little too exact to be just a coincidence. Dig a little deeper and you'll discover that 16 minus 2 is 14, and if you divide that 14 by 2 then you get 7. Then if you add that 7 to the 8 from earlier, you'll get 15. Then flip that 15 around backwards if you want to get . . . 51??!!

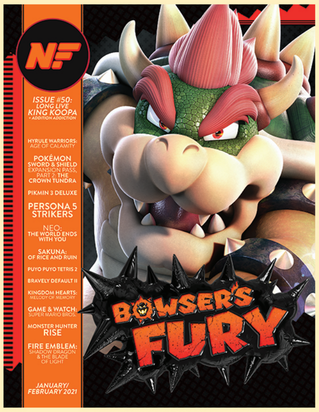
Whoa!!! What does all that mean?

Honestly, we have no idea, and that mystery is half the fun of Suda's best games. Not knowing, but still believing, that there is meaning to be found in his cryptic mythologies keeps your wheels turning and heart pounding for what might lie just under the surface. We hope this issue gives you that same sense of anticipatory excitement. Thank you for taking a chance on it. We'll do our best to make you glad that you did.

Viva Santa Destroy!

JONATHAN HOLMES





ISSUE #50: JANUARY/ FEBRUARY 2021

Have you faced off against the mighty, massive, extra mad Bowser in the all-new Bowser's Fury yet? We've got our assessment of that new adventure later in this issue, and coming off of our celebration of the great Koopa King last time, we wanted to hear about your favorite memories of him! Tales of triumph; tales of tragic loss. Then, taking our cue from the fact that Super Mario 3D World was yet another port from Wii U to Switch, we asked you which old games from the past still need to make a comeback – and what new content should be added when they do! Finally, our third Player's Poll question last time asked you to evaluate our choices for the 2020 Nintendo Force Game of the Year Awards. What did we get right? What did we get wrong? Your answers came flooding into the NF Inbox as usual, and here are just a few:

LETTERS

My best memory of Bowser has to be his iconic appearance in Super Mario Sunshine. Who can forget the purring baritone of Scott Burns as he comforts his newfound child after a defeat? The suspense as you progress through the game is thick as goop; you never quite know just when Bowser is finally going to appear, but when he does, you're greeted with the tragic embarrassment of a man who only wants to spend time with his son. His final line of dialogue strikes a chord: "But for now, let's just rest awhile." Rest I will, King Koopa.
– NICHOLAS DURRETT

My fondest memory of Bowser is from Super Mario Galaxy. He seemed like a real threat and was out there to get Peach at whatever cost! He seemed so determined and kinda scary in a way.
– MADDIX DASILVA

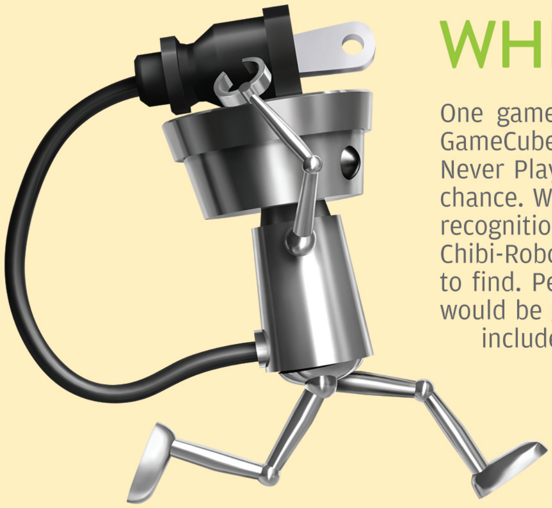
I've long enjoyed Bowser's antics, but the most memorable for me is in Super Mario RPG! I absolutely loved that Bowser lost his castle early in the game and thus "allowed" Mario to join the Koopa Troop to regain it, becoming a playable team member! It was such a clever twist at the time, and Bowser had fun attacks and lots of witty banter with the other team members. I'd actually love to see a new 3D Mario platformer where something similar happens and you can play as Bowser in a 3D space!

I think a re-release of the NES game StarTropics would be amazing! It's a very unique game with a fun setting, a stellar soundtrack and interesting mechanics. But it's also a bit frustrating to play these days if you don't want to spam save states on the digital releases – so I'd love to see some quality-of-life upgrades like more save points, better movement, more fluid combat and some updated graphics! (And they'd better still include the paper to submerge in water, of course!)
– ZACH LINDEMANN

In answer to Question #2 about a game Nintendo still needs to re-release, I'm going to go with RFX Interactive's Lady Sia. I know technically she isn't a Nintendo character, but Lady Sia for the Game Boy Advance is the first video game I can remember being obsessed with finishing. Mario always seemed too hard in the '90s, and I could never really get into Zelda until Breath of the Wild. But Lady Sia was the early 2000s action platformer I couldn't stop playing. I mean she could turn into a sasquatch!! She had a pegasus and an emerald sword. I have dreamed of a sequel for years, but if Nintendo wanted to remaster just the original GBA game for the Switch and maybe polish some of the tricky platforming/magic space issues, I would be more than grateful.
– DANIELLE BOYD

I was 7 years old when I beat Bowser #2 in Mario Odyssey. I lost the first time, but I won on the second. I was super surprised when the moon rocks were falling, and I had to capture Bowser!
– MARCO MERLINO

I think a game from the past that needs to be re-released is Paper Mario: The



WHEREFORE ART THOU, ROBO?

One game that I would like to see re-released is the original Chibi-Robo for the GameCube. That game shows up all the time on lists of "Best GameCube Games You've Never Played," but being released so late in the GameCube's lifecycle, it never had a chance. With the Switch's popularity, it's the perfect opportunity to get the game the recognition it deserves. A re-release would, of course, have to be compatible with the Chibi-Robo amiibo, but perhaps it could also add Chibi-Tots scattered through the house to find. Perhaps I'm dreaming, but a mode where you could play as Drake Redcrest would be great too. Plus, I wouldn't say no to an N. Sane Trilogy-style remaster that included Park Patrol and the first-ever English localization of the third game as well. **– JOHN NUTTALL**

As a fellow Chibi-Robo aficionado, I'll add my echo. This series absolutely should return! It was perhaps a bit ahead of its time back in the Cube era, but exploring a "giant" world of humans from the perspective of a tiny robot would be great today.

Thousand-Year Door. It was only available on the GameCube! If it was re-released, more people would get to experience one of the best Paper Mario games. I also wish EarthBound and Super Mario RPG would be added to the SNES games you get with Nintendo Switch Online. **– KATIE H.**

I'm glad that Clubhouse Games: 51 Worldwide Classics was included in the Game of the Year Awards. I loved the DS original, and the Switch sequel is great. And with the online multiplayer, I'm still able to play with friends far away.
– ZACHARY HARRIS

My dream re-release is EarthBound, with updated graphics à la Octopath Traveler. With respect to the Game of the Year Awards, I completely agreed with Animal Crossing: New Horizons taking the grand prize – but I would have liked to see more recognition of Paper Mario: The Origami King's writing. I felt that this newest installment retained much of the series' humor, while also confronting some more serious themes such as sacrifice and redemption.
– DANIEL H.

I'd choose Viewtiful Joe (1 & 2) for my re-release. I've wanted to play them for a long time, but they've become a little obscure and fallen victim to extreme price gouging. Enough time has passed that I have trouble remembering much about them, but they've remained steadfast cult classics. Not having played them, I'd be happy enough with a soundtrack and artbook (that's all I can think to add). Plus, tacking on a possible setup for a third game or comeback probably wouldn't receive any complaints. I really do hope they bring it back – otherwise, I'm gonna have to be "that guy" and say Mother 3 instead!

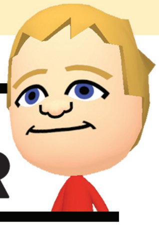
I agree that Animal Crossing is the undisputed game of 2020. I also feel that Ring Fit Adventure deserves an honorable mention given its sudden surge in popularity. In addition, I would have liked a "Best of the Smash 2020 DLC" category, but given the timing, it's understandable why you wouldn't have it. It would be a really tough decision too: Min Min fights as if she was really pulled out of her game, and has extra merit for not being the "poster character." Yet, Steve feels like he brought the entire game of Minecraft to Smash. However Sephiroth's announcement alone brought fear and excitement, and added a lot of FF music . . . yet he somehow forgot to bring a shirt (not that my sister would complain). I'd definitely go with Sephiroth mostly because a comic about him and "dress codes" would be hilarious! **– BEN W.**

One game that needs to be re-released would be Xenoblade Chronicles X. I never got a Wii U, and sadly I never got to play that game. Hopefully a re-release will happen on the Switch, because it would be perfect since some Wii U games got a re-release on the Switch such as Tokyo Mirage Sessions #FE. Also Nintendo should re-release the Mother/EarthBound series because it seems to be one of the top series that everyone wants to be released. It should come with better graphics, more enemies, anything that was cut from the story and other content that didn't come with the initial release.

For the Nintendo Force 2020 Game of the Year Awards, I didn't find anything wrong with it. My only complaints were that some games didn't get represented, such as RPG Game of the Year and Fighting Game of the Year. And there should have been a runner-up for each category. **– GEORGE LEE**

My fondest experience of Bowser was on Mario Party 8. I was on the train level when I landed on a Bowser space, and the train suddenly became Bowser-themed. I got scared, because I was young. But, when I got to the front of the train and Bowser saw that I didn't have any stars, he gave me coins instead. Ha! **– BENJAMIN HILTY**

CARTER'S CORNER



11! I have 11 Level 100s in Pokémon Shield. They are Rillaboom, Zamazenta, Urshifu, Corviknight, Noiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii! (Noivern), Carter (a Scorbunny I got from my cousin Abby; Abby had named the Scorbunny Carter), Roof Roof (a Boltund from Abby), Calyrex (capture date: Halloween; and Level 100 on my birthday), Inteleon (please don't ask), Moltres and Zapdos. But still, my Level 100s have lost in battles, like the Cobalion battle.

Calvin? His Level 100s are Zamazenta, Urshifu, Wailord and Calyrex.

My top favorite Level 100s: 5) Corviknight. 4) Urshifu. 3) Cinderace (tied with Calyrex and Noivern). 2) Zamazenta. 1) RILLABOOM!!! I like Grass-types. I've had those Level 100s since last year.

Recently, I've been busy making Mario Maker levels. (And in the middle of that, playing Bowser's Fury). Anyway, please look forward to Monty Airship, Rocky Wrench Way, Morty Mole Mountain and Morton Mole Mountain.

@NINTENDOFORCE ASKS . . .

Who's your favorite Koopaling/Koopa Kid, and why?

Roy's our boy! Mainly cause I dig the shades. The dude has style.
– @INSERTTOKENZ

Morton is my bro!
– @MICIOSEGONEGAME

It's all about Lemmy! I love his bouncing ball/bomb gimmick, and it feels so good to finally see him after finishing all of Ice Land. **– @DAVID_SNUCLEAR**

Wendy. It's the sass.
– @BETTERTHANVEGAS

Larry. My man doesn't need a gimmicky name to stand out.
– @GLENNMU59708474

Iggy. On account of having beaten him the most as a kid.
– @HEMARTINEZ7896

Ludwig, because of his fabulous hair.
– @LETAUGUSTO1

Junior. He's just so mischievous!!!
– @THEANDERSON64

I'd have to flip a coin to decide between Wendy O. and Roy. I love the uniqueness of Wendy's fights throwing the rings but I also love Roy's style and he was the boss of Sky World which was one of my favorites in SMB3. **– @DFDFLEMING**

Roy, because he screams '80s fashion.
– @ZILLIONTRIFORM

Always really liked Ludwig's hair tbh.
– @SIRFETCHDGANG

It would be Bowser Jr., but not including him it would be Morton.
– @NINTENDOX4

Lemmy. Such a goof.
– @FLUISHZEBRA

Roy is literally the embodiment of vibing. He's everything I aspire to be as a person. Plus he's got cool shades.
– @HYLIAN_ALPH

My favorite is Ludwig. While Morton is just the best in the Bowser Jr. campaign in the Mario & Luigi: Bowser's Inside Story remaster. **– @GINNYN**

Iggy~ For various reasons
– @SCYSTORM

Roy's the boy, he's got cool shades and a really nice shade of pink on his head.
– @DARIKSTER1

There is only one correct answer.
– @LEMMY_TOYS

THE PLAYER'S POLL

Congratulations to **Nicholas Durrett**, the winner of our last Player's Poll!

. . . There are no new questions this time! Instead, we want your photo submissions! With New Pokémon Snap fast approaching, we're getting into a photographic mood. So we want to see some photos from you! You could snap shots of your Nintendo game collection, or maybe your array of amiibos. You could give us a glimpse of your game room, or maybe present a picture of your pet dressed up like a Mario character! However you'd like to illustrate your love of Nintendo in photo form is fine with us.

Email your photos to **PlayersPoll@NFMagazine.com** with the subject line "Player's Poll for Issue #52" – this time, one reader whose picture is picked for print will win a brand-new copy of New Pokémon Snap! (Our second time giving it away!)

NINTENDO FORCE

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
Lucas M. Thomas
@NintendoForce

STAFF WRITERS
Evan Campbell
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Chris Carter
@DtoidChris
Kevin Cassidy
@GoNintendoTweet
Jonathan Holmes
@NonTrotski
Kevin Knezevic
@kevknez
Maggie Jones Lutey
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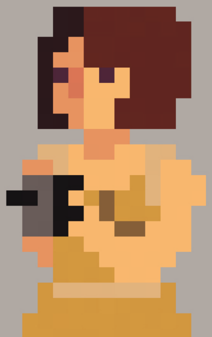
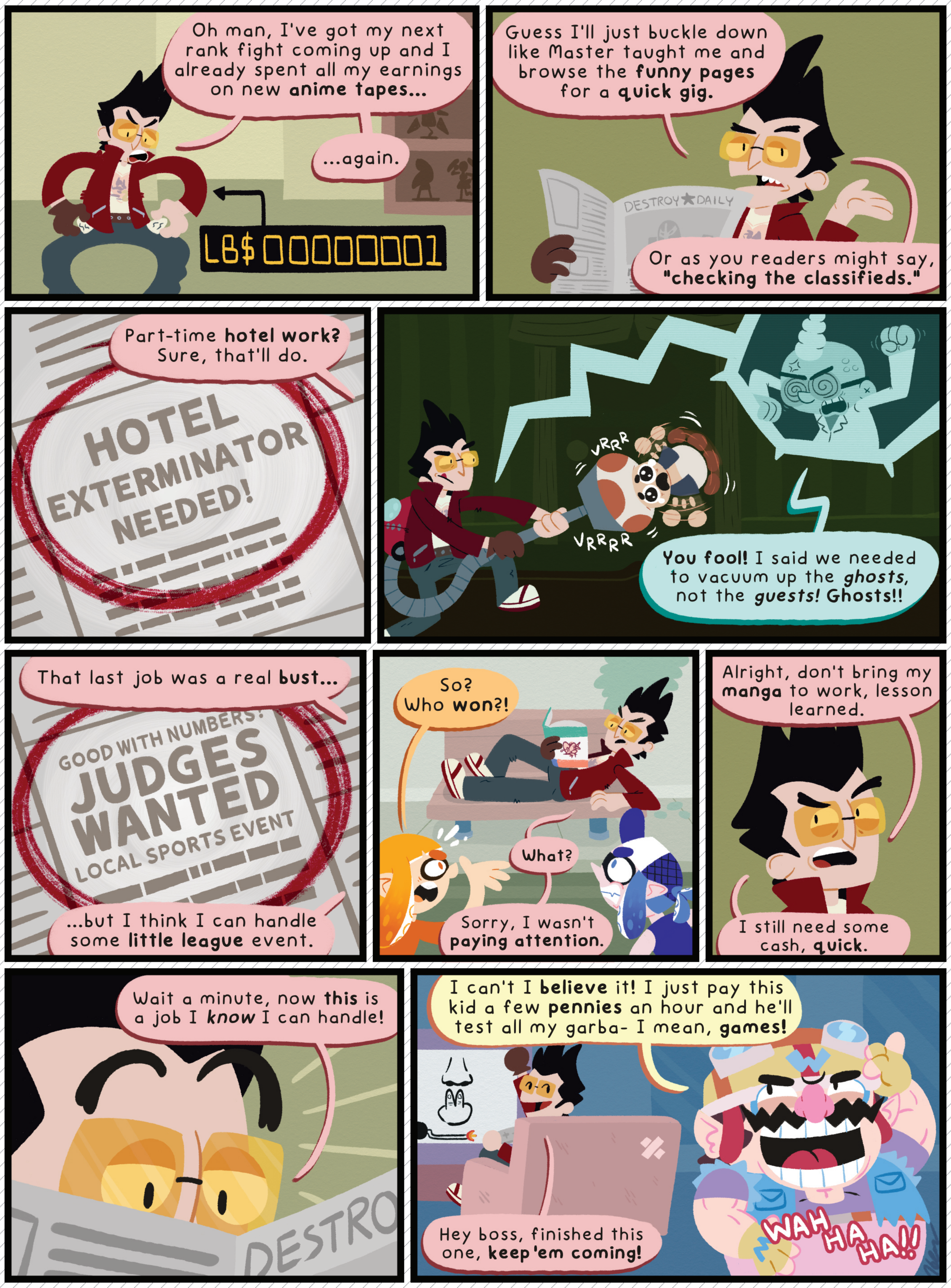
Nadia Oxford
@nadiaoxford
Tony Ponce
@megaStryke
Kris Randazzo
@GeekadeKris
Rebecca Rudranath
@strawbecky_81

STAFF ARTISTS
John-Charles Holmes
@Sonic9jct
Lindsey Layne King
@Jazaaboo
Matthew Loffhagen
@kotorcomics
Matthew Taranto
@MatthewPTaranto
Thor Thorvaldson
@thormeister1971

CONTRIBUTORS
Pete Marshall
@PhaseSix_Soft
Bryan Mitchell
@PromptedInk
Carter Thomas





BY JOHN-CHARLES HOLMES

Can't Let You Do That, Netflix

Nintendo pulled the plug on two adaptations . . . *six years ago.*

AND NOW FOR an update to the news reported on this same page six years ago in our March/April 2015 edition: It ain't happenin'.

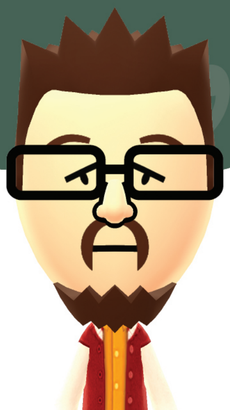
"It" being the rumored live-action Legend of Zelda television show that was supposedly in the works at Netflix. The rumor that the streaming giant and Nintendo were joining forces ran like wildfire through the Big N fandom back then, especially since reports claimed that the Zelda adaptation was being envisioned as "a family-friendly version of Game of Thrones." Trying to assemble a mental picture of just what that jarring juxtaposition would look like was hard enough, but then adding the Zelda brand, with its famously silent protagonist, on top of all that? Surely the result would have been, well, unique.

But now we'll never know! Recently Adam Conover (of CollegeHumor and Adam Ruins Everything fame) gave Nintendo fans a long-delayed confirmation that such a show was in fact on its way to production at Netflix . . . but the fact that its existence leaked and it got reported about by just about every entertainment outlet on Earth caused Nintendo to get cold feet and cancel the whole thing. Supposedly someone at Netflix leaked the news on purpose, hoping to build buzz for the show – and Nintendo didn't take kindly to their property being handled like that.

Also caught in the crossfire: a claymation Star Fox series parodying The Fantastic Mr. Fox, Wes Anderson's film from 2009. This is where Adam came in, as he and CollegeHumor were the ones working on it – clearly using the two-minute sketch they'd produced in 2011 (seen above) as the pitch.

Nintendo and Netflix might have parted ways in 2015, but that didn't stop the streamer from pursuing other video game properties to adapt into shows. The Witcher (at left), starring Henry Cavill, premiered in 2019 and has been incredibly well received. Maybe its success will get Nintendo to reconsider the live-action Zelda idea?

"On the one hand, it stinks that we could have had more TV shows based on Big N brands. On the other, we might have dodged a bullet – they could have ended up being terrible! Nintendo will probably see how the new Mario animated movie fares with audiences before making more film or show decisions now."
– LUCAS



E3 Fades Again

The age of the annual expo may be at an end.

THERE'S A FEELING of finality this time.

The annual Electronic Entertainment Expo is in trouble. E3 has been the flagship event for the entire video game industry for over a quarter of a century, ever since it was first held in 1995. It's been the shining centerpiece of spectacle and excess – the place where, once a year, all the biggest names in games gather together in a single space and try to outgun everyone else with incredible announcements and amazing playable demos of upcoming releases. I've attended several of them in person over the years, and it's really like stepping into a Disney World for gamers for three days straight – there are plenty of problems with the event, but it's still managed to maintain a magical feel all the same.

Until now. Those problems of putting on such an expansive physical show seem to have finally reached the tipping point of outweighing the benefits to be gained by game publishers, and so it seems like E3 might at last be on its way out. The show has struggled to find its identity before – waffling between format changes and whether or not to allow the public to attend – but the last-minute cancellation forced upon last year's expo might have been the final nail in the coffin. Game studios spread out and found their own ways to make announcements and share word of their upcoming wares through alternative sources like the quickly mobilized Summer Game Fest, or else just dropping trailers straight onto Twitter.

But while it's true that game reveals need little more than a social media account to reach an audience, it's still sad that big, brilliant booths decorated with life-size Bokoblins or huge in-person Smash tournaments might cease to be in the aftershocks of E3's demise. The show may survive; it might come back in the future. But, for now, I'm just feeling like it's finally fading away again – for good. **– LUCAS**

Crossing Over

The dominance of New Horizons continues!

JUST A QUICK update on Animal Crossing: New Horizons, as we're closing in on its one-year anniversary: It's still shattering all expectations! As of December 31, 2020 (just about nine months after launch), its sales were reported to be at *31,180,000 copies sold!* That's an insane amount, and it was just shy of the total sales of Mario Kart 8 Deluxe since its launch in 2017 – which means that, by this point, it's surely eclipsed that final competitor to become the overall Switch #1.

Knowing what a winner they have on their hands, Nintendo's continuing to support the game with regular updates, like newly added Mario crossover content. VIZ Media is also localizing the New Horizons manga, so keep an eye out for that in September! **– LUCAS**

1-Up Factory Favorites

Super Nintendo World's got way too much merch to manage!

I'VE SEEN THE Nintendo merchandise machine work its magic before, but I've never seen such a huge influx of Mario merchandise all at once! An unprecedentedly epic drop of merch is available exclusively at the 1-Up Factory shop in Super Nintendo World at Universal Studios Japan. We couldn't possibly print pictures of every available item, so the dozen seen above are just a small sampling of the overflowing inventory!

Almost every category of merch is full of Mario gear: plushes, apparel, keychains, charms, stationery, puppets, figures, toys and more. How does that little store house all this stuff?

The plushes are the big draw, and the Bowser and Bowser Jr. plushes seem to turn heads the most, though there are grand opening versions of Chef Toad and Mario that come with commemorative coins. There are exclusive Mario, Luigi and Yoshi Mario Kart figures that come with an item, and a Chef Toad figure on a base. Keychain plushes of so many baddies and friends released, as well as metal charms and keychains. Multi-colored Yoshis appear in figure and keychain form. None of them are from previous releases.

An inordinate amount of food items to taste come in collectible containers, like cookie tins or the Mario figure in a pipe. Confections come out of mushrooms, emblem-emblazoned drawers, Yoshi eggs, tires and more. There's even a set of character lip balm. Socks, shirts, hoodies, plush hats and even hand warmers are all available. Who doesn't want a Bowser or Goomba hat? I've also never seen plush earrings before, but this store has them in both Mario and Luigi styles.

The showstopper in this sea of goods, for me, is the Tokotoko Mario figure. There are two versions: the Koura set and the Dokan set. Both have a Mario figure that walks along when pushed. The Koura set comes with a red Koopa Troopa shell (to make it easier to push) and a flag, and the Dokan set comes with a pipe.

Basically, the store is a dream come true for anyone who loves Mario and his friends and enemies – and it's a fever dream and nightmare for collectors!

This store can also be bittersweet, as it simply ignores all of the other Nintendo properties, despite it being called Super Nintendo World. It will be a major detriment to budgets and bank accounts everywhere. Hopefully our American locations will get all the same stuff once they're built, but there's no telling if that will happen!

BY BRETT MARTIN

Shovel & Snuggle

Cadence has learned the rhythm of cuteness.

THE STAR OF Crypt of the NecroDancer and occasional visitor to Hyrule, Cadence, has been plushified by Nina Matsumoto of Fangamer. She is about 10 inches tall in the sitting position and she retails at $29. A shovel accessory can be placed in her hands using the magnets inside her palms. Now she can help you keep the beat any time!

amiibo UPDATE

CAT MARIO AND Cat Peach released and Bowser and Bowser Jr. re-released for the launch of Super Mario 3D World on Switch in February, then pre-orders went up for Banjo & Kazooie, Byleth and Terry's debut on March 26. Monster Hunter Rise will drop that same day, with the Palamute, Palico and Magnamalo amiibos. These three will also be released in a rare gold variety in a promo with 7-11 in Japan!

As a complete surprise, the Sanrio x Animal Crossing amiibo cards are coming to North America with a full release. This announcement comes four years after their Japanese release! Perhaps the Sanrio-inspired animals will come to New Horizons?

Looking ahead, Min-Min, Steve, Sephiroth, Pyra and Mythra all need release dates and sculpts as the Smash series carries on. Plenty to look forward to!

Super Pac-Mech!

Actually not the first robot suit he's piloted.

TAMASHII NATIONS FIGURE creators have gone mad for Pac-Man's 40th anniversary and have developed a Chogokin Pac-Man mech that Pac-Man can ride in. The $90 mech can shoot fists or ghosts, and it can even convert from a standing mech to a vehicle with tank treads!

Gold and silver coins, a Timex watch, several compilation albums and a history book have also been announced, along with the load of merch seen back in Issue #47. Bandai is adding Pac-Man to their ENTRY GRADE lineup of model kits, Neamedia is releasing several figures for their Icons line and Puma and COURIR even collaborated to release a commemorative pair of shoes. Go see the full list at **Pacman.com**!

Gourmet Memories

Kirby Super Star scores a super statue!

A STATUE BASED on a minigame from 1996's Kirby Super Star coming out in July of 2021? Weirder things have happened! Matsuda Model is making this Gourmet Race statue for Megahouse. Kirby, King Dedede, Waddle Dee and Chef Kawasaki all appear in the 7-inch statue. It depicts the result of the food-themed race between rivals found in the game, with Kirby being the clear winner, and King Dedede lamenting his loss. The statue will retail in Japan at around $120.

Sonic 2 Targets 2022

The second live-action movie speeds ahead.

IT'S BEEN OVER a year since the first live-action Sonic the Hedgehog film opened in theaters, so we're good to talk spoilers now, right? I mean, if you had any interest in seeing this movie at all, you must have either gone to see it in person when it premiered or else figured out a way to watch it at home at some point during the now nearly year-long virus lockdowns that began just about a month after its silver screen debut.

So, how about that Tails tease at the end, huh?

As it turns out, we won't have to wait too long to see the payoff for that post-credits stinger, as Sonic the Hedgehog 2 is now set to arrive in theaters on April 8, 2022. That's still over a year away as of this writing, but it'll just be a gap of two years and two months between the two films when it opens, which is a really fast turnaround for Hollywood sequels. But what else would you expect from Sonic than "really fast?"

In addition to confirming the release date, Paramount Pictures also gave us a look at the logo – leaving no doubt that Tails will play a major role in this sequel, the same way he did in the original Sonic 2 video game. And we can be sure Jim Carrey will be even crazier! **– LUCAS**

Next Level Punches In

Nintendo makes a heavyweight acquisition.

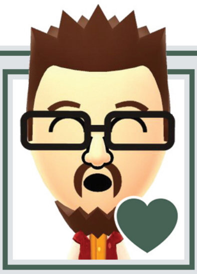
NEXT LEVEL GAMES is leveling up.

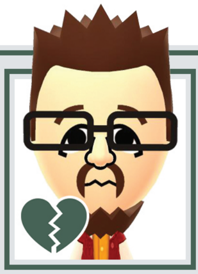
Based in Vancouver – just a stone's throw across the Canadian border from Nintendo of America headquarters a bit further south in Redmond, Washington – Next Level is a studio that's been entrusted with major first-party Nintendo properties for years. In fact, they were given the Big N's biggest name at the very beginning, as the team's first project for Nintendo was Super Mario Strikers! Since that game's launch on the GameCube back in 2005, they've handled development duty on several more big series installments, like the 2009 Wii revival of Punch-Out!!, the ambitious (but largely hated by fans) Metroid Prime: Federation Force and the must more well received Luigi's Mansion 3.

It's likely the stunning sales success of that last one in the list (it's sold over 9,000,000 copies so far!) that caused Nintendo to finally pull the trigger and decide to acquire Next Level Games! The studio hasn't been exclusive to the Nintendo ecosystem before now – they've also developed a handful of Xbox and PlayStation titles over the years. But now their time and talents will be 100% dedicated to boosting Nintendo's machines.

Nintendo doesn't acquire outside studios very often at all, so this is surprising but welcome news. It's an investment that's sure to pay off – after all, no other team in the business could have blessed us with the glory of Disco Kid! **– LUCAS**

Great!
Next Level deserves the best! They do great work!





Oh.
E3's on the fast track to permanent irrelevance.

FORECAST

A meteorological look at the biggest game and DLC releases currently scheduled to debut in the next few months.

KICKING THINGS OFF for the Forecast this time is our cover game for this issue, No More Heroes III. Originally it was going to launch last year . . . before last year descended into madness. Now it's been rescheduled for a debut on August 27. I know, I know! That's too far away for it to have been the cover game already, and it throws this Forecast out of order too. But we had to give Issue #51 to Suda51! New preview beginning on Page 44.

SONY AND MICROSOFT fans got to take the first crack at the latest Crash last year, as this new sequel debuted on PS4 and Xbox One on October 2. A little over five months later, it's making its way to the Switch! March 12 will be when you'll be able to spin into Crash and Coco's time-twisting tale, and you can read more on Page 49.

TWO WEEKS LATER, March 26 will host a double-header of heavy hitters coming from Square Enix and Capcom. First up, Balan Wonderworld, the new project from industry legend Yuji Naka. With that big of a name behind it, expectations for this one have been high . . . but recently a bland demo got many fans second-guessing about how the final product will turn out. David's got thoughts over on Page 47.

SINCE THE BRAND name "Monster Hunter" has a whole lot more power than the brand-new "Balan Wonderworld," it's likely that Capcom's contribution to the March 26 pair of new releases was going to come out way ahead in sales regardless – but the demo for Monster Hunter Rise was a lot more promising than Balan's too! Check out Page 48.

NO FRESH PREVIEW of this one in this edition, I'm afraid, since Maggie did a great job setting the stage for its release in our last issue. But I'm inserting this small update here since we now know when that release will take place! April 9 is the date to mark on your calendars for Trails of Cold Steel IV, which will be where the Cold Steel saga comes to an end. (The greater Trails story will continue in future games, though!)

ALMOST 8,000 DAYS will have come and gone since the American release of Pokémon Snap on the Nintendo 64 when its long-sought-after sequel will finally appear on the Nintendo Switch. April 30 is the day the dream comes true, so cheers to all you fellow fans of the first game out there who've endured the decades-long wait! Preview: Page 50.

AFTER LAST YEAR'S long stretches of silence, we've now had back-to-back NF issues with fresh Smash character reveals! Ladies and gentlemen (and especially Xenoblade Chronicles 2 fans), bid welcome to Pyra and Mythra!

I'm really going to have to replay XC2 and finish its story this time in order to understand entirely, but Pyra and Mythra are kinda sorta the same character. Two halves of the same coin, like Zelda and Sheik in Ocarina of Time. So, in the same way that those two were originally brought into the Smash series as a single fighter who was able to freely change forms back and forth, so too will these two debut as a two-in-one character with access to an on-the-fly transformation move to switch at will.

Though few Smash speculators predicted this reveal (everyone keeps guessing Crash all the time), Mr. Sakurai tipped his hand years ago when he apologized for not getting a rep for Xenoblade Chronicles 2 into the base roster and gave away a Rex Mii Swordfighter costume for free as a bonus to players who bought the first Fighters Pass. It was only a matter of time!

Pyra and Mythra will arrive in the roster in March, and we'll have our review of them next time. In the meanwhile, if you're upset about this selection, just flip to the next page! I'm going to talk a bit about Smash "tiers" there.

> As winter once again gives way to spring – and the Switc[h] ... four years old – I'm impressed at the momentum the system has managed [t]o maintain! This slate of software shows no signs of slowing down. On the hardware side of things, we've still heard no official word about a "Switch Pro" at this point. I thought we would have by now. But I suppose Nintendo just doesn't want to fix what isn't broken yet? – LUCAS

The Seven Tiers of Joining Smash

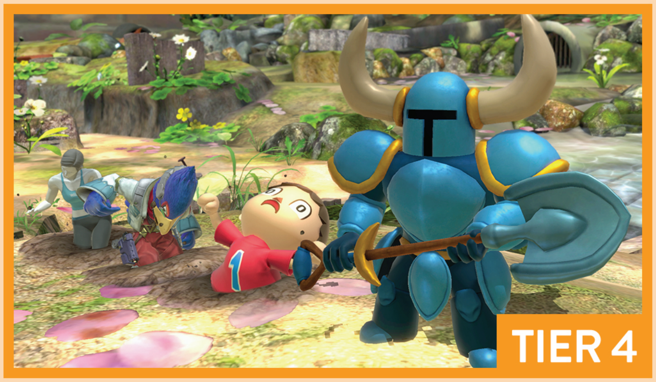
Suda51's Travis Touchdown is among the many who have made the cut . . . at different levels.

SAKURAI'S AN ASSASSIN. He kills hopes and dreams! Every time a new character is confirmed to be joining the Super Smash Bros. cast via DLC, one fandom cheers the choice while all others cry out in agony, lamenting the loss of yet another chance for their preferred fighter to make it in.

But then, Smash representation is not as simple as it used to be. There are many different ways a character can now appear in gaming's greatest crossover, and fans who are able to rein in their expectations a bit and appreciate the "lower tiers" of joining Smash are surely in a healthier mental state than anyone who's still all-or-nothing about full playability.

I posit that seven such levels currently exist. "Tier 0," or just off the list, would be any character who has no Smash representation whatsoever. Characters like Mike Jones from the StarTropics series – who has never appeared in any form in any Smash sequel – sadly live there. Anyone who earnestly loves any character or series still stuck on the outside looking in should be able to appreciate the honor of all actual Smash appearances.

Like Tier 1: Spirits. New in the latest generation of Smash, Spirits are little more than static, unmoving images. Simple unanimated artwork. And yet what a joy to see an indie darling like Shantae make the cut in this manner! The Spirits are all low-effort inclusions in Ultimate, but their usage is often cute, cool or comical, as each is used to "possess" one of the actual roster characters who resembles them in some way. Shantae, for instance, can be fought in the form of the similarly ponytailed Zero Suit Samus.



Tier 2 has Travis Touchdown. He arrived in the wake of the Minecraft Steve character announcement last year, as it's become common for Mr. Sakurai to support new full-fledged fighter reveals with a handful of Mii costume characters — and that's what Travis is. It's not really Travis himself so much as it's his outfit, beam katana and hairdo all made available for Mii Swordfighter custom characters to select. Dozens of different characters that aren't otherwise represented have landed here, as you can dress your Miis up like everyone from Chibi-Robo to Geno to MegaMan.EXE. It's always still clearly just a Mii doing cosplay at this level, though. But then you get to . . .

Tier 3. Deluxe Mii Fighter costumes! This is another new addition specific to the Switch sequel, but there are now a handful of characters who fully look exactly as they should — no Mii faces popping through — but their gameplay functionality is just reused from the Miis. This is how Sans from Undertale made his surprise Smash debut, and since then Bomberman, Cuphead and Vault Boy from the Fallout series have been given similar treatment. Sans and Cuphead both got songs, too, if you purchased their $0.75 Deluxe Mii DLC!

How important is it for you to be able to take direct control of your favorite character? Because Tier 4, in the middle, is where playability is sacrificed in favor of accurate representation. It's the Assist Trophies, like Shovel Knight, seen above. Thus far the Blue Burrower has not become a Mii option, though it's easy to imagine how a Swordfighter costume would swap his iconic Shovel Blade in and how his horned helmet would be a fun headgear option for any kind of Mii. But because he doesn't have to match up with the Miis' established hitboxes and proportions, he can be fully on-model as his actual self, and we can enjoy seeing him drop into battle and literally bury his opponents — unique actions he otherwise wouldn't have. I would have loved to see Shovel Knight be fully playable — he was my choice when we advocated for Ballot votes years ago — but I can't be upset at how faithfully he's been presented.

Tier 5! Here's a level that doesn't get a lot of thought, but it's the "alt costume" slot. Some characters, like Alph seen above or all the Koopalings seen back on Page 6, are full playable fighters — they just have to share their moves and character slot with a more prominent "primary" fighter. In these cases, Olimar and Bowser Jr. The Hero from Dragon Quest's four different forms all land here, too, as do Steve/Alex/Enderman/Zombie.

The delineation between Tiers 5 and 6 is hard to pinpoint precisely, but in Ultimate, some characters who previously might have been alt costumes were instead awarded a higher title: "Echo Fighter." These characters get their own position on the select screen and their own amiibo figures, but copy most of their moves from another, more prominent fighter. For the most part, the shift has been beneficial, but I'm still a little upset about Dark Samus in particular, as she was better represented as an Assist Trophy with unique Phazon tendril-summoning moves — as a playable fighter nested underneath normal Samus, she's not as unique any more.

Speaking of echoes, I feel like I may be echoing thoughts here that I've expressed before . . . but, if so, I still think it's worthwhile to have a State of the Smash Union address to get us all re-centered as we head into what may very well be the home stretch for this generation of the series. It's possible that a third Fighters Pass could materialize, or just other Challenger Packs flying solo in the future, but as things stand at this writing, we've got just three Tier 7 additions remaining.

Tier 7 being, of course, the highest possible placement: full, truly unique playable character status. The Holy Grail of Smash representation. The honor afforded to dozens at this point, including the deadly Sephiroth, whom I'll evaluate individually a little later.

It would have been awesome to see Travis Touchdown claim a Tier 7 slot out of nowhere. I would have loved it if Geno had done the same, or Waluigi, or any of a number of others. But with all these levels of representation defined, I just hope that Smash fans can be thankful no matter where their favorites landed on the list. Making the cut at any level is still such a rare honor, even though the roster has expanded so sharply over the years.

And if you're still struggling, just keep in mind that characters tend to climb the ladder in later sequels! King K. Rool was on Tier 2 on Wii U. He's on Tier 7 now! Little Mac was an Assist Trophy before he got promoted to playable status in the next installment. Daisy started as a misrendered Melee Trophy with an extra eyeball!

Travis' time may come. Waluigi might get his shot. Or maybe not! Just try not to let the shock of any character's "deconfirmation" turn into any real sadness, because Smash is still the Ultimate crossover! **— LUCAS**

8.5

The Assassin's Origin

NO MORE HEROES

"HEROES." That was the name of a short pitch video directed by Suda51, used to attract potential publishing partners. That eventually became No More Heroes, Suda's first game to become a franchise, spawning motion comics, art books and even a Mii costume in Smash for Travis Touchdown, the game's star. Though fans were initially disappointed that Travis wasn't a full-fledged fighter, in some ways, it makes just as much sense for him to be represented as a Mii than as his own person. At his core, he's a stand-in for video game nerds everywhere. He's a loner who loves fantasy – competitive at times, cringeworthy at others, but underneath all his bravado and bloodlust, he's really just looking to escape.

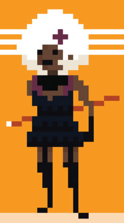
In Japanese, the word "ma" means the emptiness between events that is full of possibilities. In No More Heroes, the "ma" is dumpster diving, doing odd jobs for cash, petting your cat and cruising on your motorcycle through the sometimes boring streets of Santa Destroy, the city Travis calls home. Traversing this open world feels like an unintentional parody of the genre in particular, and of a bachelor's social life in general. With few surface level trappings to distract you or relationships to motivate you, Travis' days in the "real world" can feel as empty as the calorie load in a "Doritos and Mountain Dew" dinner for one.

Things get more heated when Travis takes his beam katana (an off-brand lightsaber that he bought on eBay) to the battlefield against dozens of bloodthirsty assassins. This is where his competitive gamer side comes out – except the game is murder, and his fellow assassins are the boss fights. These bosses, and the stories weaved between them, are among the most memorable in gaming, and have to be played to be believed. It's an adventure that's big on metaphors but seriously low on subtlety. In order to pop his weapon out, Travis has to waggle it suggestively, and to drop his save data, he poops in toilets. It's both low-brow and high art at the same time, making for a perfect fit for the Wii in 2008. It playfully mocks the concept of motion controls, while also making legitimately good use of them, serving as a parody-tribute to both motion games and serious-faced gamers.

All of those mechanics made it over to this Switch port, which ignores the PS3/360 versions (which used all-new character models) and instead updates and upscales the original graphics. Motion controls are now optional, the framerate has improved and the resolution is a lot better, but beyond that, this is the same game that started it all. There's also an iconic song called Heavenly Star that's been cut from the soundtrack, but those licensing deals only last for so long.

Those details aside, No More Heroes can be tricky to recommend. It's oozing with style and substance, but it's more for people who love connecting with the artist behind their games, and less for those looking for a virtual playground to call their own. In some ways too big, in others too small; some may say it pales in comparison to similar AAA titles. The difference is that it does a great job of talking about video games, even if it doesn't always excel at being one. **– JONATHAN**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: XSEED DEVELOPER: GRASSHOPPER MANUFACTURE RATING: M



9.5

Twice as Lethal Three Years Later

NO MORE HEROES 2: DESPERATE STRUGGLE

THE FIRST NO MORE HEROES sold itself on being different, making it an inherently tough act to follow. A sequel that was just more of the same would kill Suda's unique brand of rebellious energy, while one that was too different would be a betrayal. That balancing act is the real desperate struggle of No More Heroes 2, and the results are fantastic.

While the combat isn't as deep as Bayonetta or other AAA character action titles, it's still a big step up from the first game. Now Travis can get a beam katana that gets longer and stronger the more you use it, a pair of dual-wielding blades that you inherit from an NPC played by famed Japanese director Takashi Miike (!) and even a power-up that turns him into a tiger! There are also missions where you play as the Glastonbury (Travis' giant robot), Shinobu Jacobs (one the bosses from the first game) and Henry Cooldown (Travis' brother and rival).

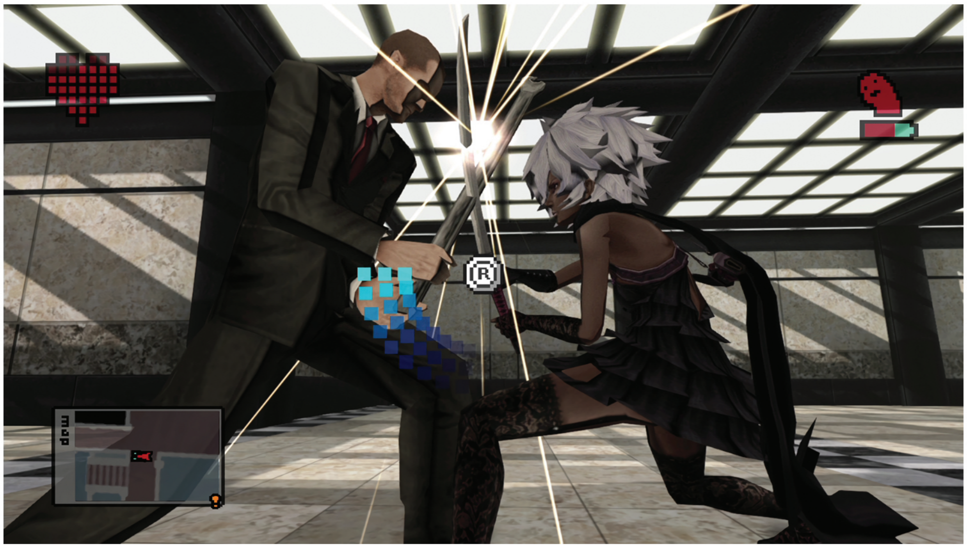
These newly playable characters tie into the game's overall theme of family vs. revenge. Early in the game, Travis' best friend is killed in a hit ordered by Jasper Batt Jr., a sort of cross between Bruce Wayne and The Joker who wants revenge on Travis for killing his father and two brothers in No More Heroes 1. From there Travis must take on 51 ranked assassins to get to Batt, resulting in 15 boss fights in total, many of which feature sympathetic foes who seem keenly aware that they live in a video game. In fact, some even hail from alternate realities based on tributes to Metal Gear Solid and Resident Evil 4, two titles from big-name developers who've partnered with Suda in the past.

Another big change is that the open world has been cut and replaced with a simple map that allows you to hop to shops, a gym and various side jobs instantaneously. Both working and working out take form in the style of classic 8-bit games, and many of them are even more fun than the main game. I found myself replaying the bug extermination, burger frying, space junk cleaning and puzzle solving jobs over and over again — not only for cash to buy new clothes and weapons, but also just because I loved them.

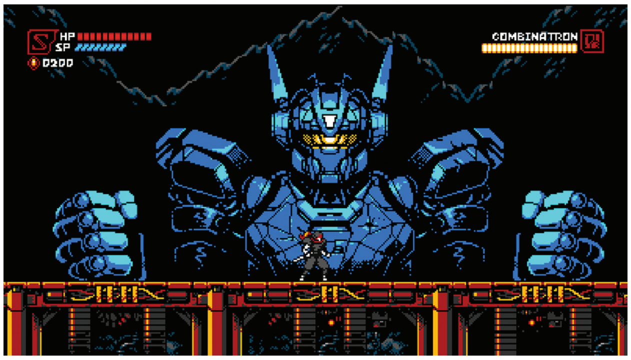
I also had a blast with the new game-within-a-game shmup (starring the cast of Pure White Lover Bizarre Jelly, Travis' favorite anime) and the adorable and ridiculous minigames in which you help your beloved, belovehandled cat Jeane get back into shape.

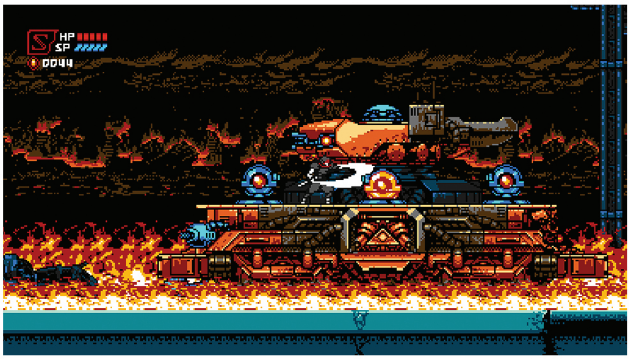
And yet, many were still disappointed with this sequel. Maybe that's because there are moments in its predecessor that just can't be topped (the last boss and accompanying cutscenes being a prime example). Instead of trying to go beyond the original in terms of pure unconventionality, Travis' sophomore effort instead brings the cast of Grasshopper Manufacturer's signature series together in ways that feel dreamlike at times, and very real at others, fusing art and craft for a total package that's much less of an acquired taste than the first.

It's still not perfect (it can get a bit repetitive), but it's still one of my all-time favorites. **— JONATHAN**



SWITCH PUBLISHER: XSEED DEVELOPER: GRASSHOPPER MANUFACTURE RATING: M





Ninja Action Apocalypse

CYBER SHADOW

IT WILL BE impossible to do this review without referencing some retro games, so let's get that out of the way. The cybernetic protagonist, Shadow, is an obvious throwback to Ryu Hayabusa of Ninja Gaiden, and when he emerges from a chamber designed to give his mind a vessel, he is weak and unfinished. Still, the need is dire as Dr. Progen has gone mad trying to save his daughter, The Master. Other members of your clan have been locked in chambers as well, and when you find them throughout Mekacity, their essences will give you new skills. This is akin to visiting Dr. Light's capsules in Mega Man X, and the skills received have parallels as well. You'll end up wall jumping and dashing your way through the dreary, dystopian ruins.

SWITCH PUBLISHER: YACHT CLUB GAMES DEVELOPER: MECHANICAL HEAD STUDIOS RATING: E10+

In fact, the atmosphere and baddies reminded me a lot of Journey to Silius, a somewhat obscure NES title that apparently was supposed to be a Terminator game before abandoning that track and releasing under its own IP. And while the game is largely linear, backtracking to find secrets reminded me of Metroid. With all of these great games to pull inspiration from, it's no wonder that Mechanical Head has a winner on their hands.

The game is fully immersed in and loyal to its 8-bit style. The cutscenes will be very reminiscent of previously mentioned games and the story may be cobbled together from them, too. The gameplay is very challenging. With each new skill, more freedom of movement is attained, but there will be harder obstacles and enemies to impede it. You can expand your essence (or HP), and your SP meter controls how many special moves you can do, like throwing a shuriken or dash slashing. You always know you're nearing a new power-up when there are twice the spikes and despicably placed enemies.

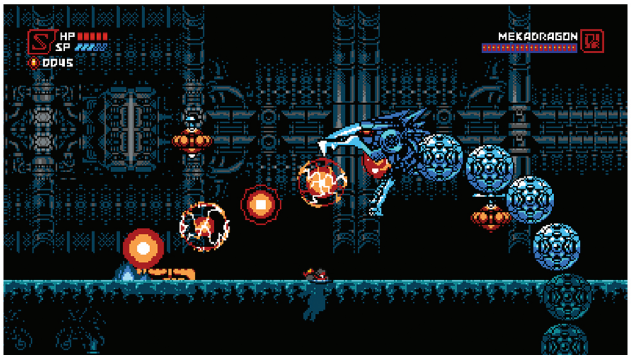
Each enemy feels like a fresh new challenge that you must approach differently, and enemy respawns are largely turned off, so the game doesn't feel unfair or broken. It would have been nice to have a duck function for some of the areas, and I also had a bit of a problem at times turning around. You can't turn while you slash, and the whole frenetic pace of the game means that can be a problem. The gadgets you can find or purchase from save points help, and while many are fleeting, they are fun to use. Shields that shoot, saw blades that swing, guns and more aid your quest.

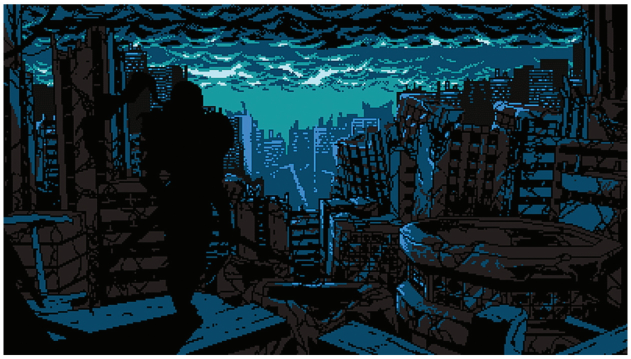
Toward the end of the game each area feels less exploratory and more like gauntlets to reach save points, but it's still satisfying. Bosses mean business, and each one is unique and challenging. They have names like Apparitor, Laserbrain, Mekadragon and Biohunter.

The game took me around eight hours to complete. Backtracking might add another hour to the tally, and while it was short, it was immensely satisfying. Along with a timer, in absolutely unquestionably brutal fashion, the game gives you a kill counter at the end of the credits. For you to laugh at . . . and feel sad about and maybe question your gamer skill, but it's fine. The game also has "feats" that players can challenge themselves with on replays, but a New Game+ would have been nice. Some are fun, some seem ludicrous, but I'm confident someone will pull them off.

Now to hit F5 on Bandcamp until the soundtrack comes out! **— BRETT**

8.5





Can You Shuriken? Sure You Can!

TANUKI JUSTICE

AT FIRST GLANCE, Tanuki Justice might look like an homage to classic NES-era games like Ninja Gaiden. There are some surface level similarities for sure, but this game is 100% pure arcade action platformer (for better or worse).

Tanuki Justice puts you in control of a nameless ninja tanuki out to stop an evil being from conquering the world. If you're looking for more plot, you're out of luck, because that's all there is! Your character can run, double jump and throw ninja stars in eight directions. The only power-ups available are a single-hit shield and an enhancement to your projectiles that goes away once you die.

And die you shall! Because the game's biggest source of inspiration is clearly arcade games that were designed to eat as many quarters as possible. It's filled with cheap deaths and absolutely insane enemy patterns that require both memorization and lightning-fast reflexes. The good news is, that stuff is mitigated slightly thanks to the fact that it doesn't require literal quarters to keep playing it, and you can restart from the beginning of the stage you died in whenever you like. The countless one-hit kills still sting, but it maintains a small semblance of fair play, which is nice. The game wants to kill you, but it also wants you to persevere.

That can be made a little easier with a second player. In the vein of classics like Contra, Tanuki Justice features a pretty solid co-op mode. Here, so long as one player is still alive, you can continue from where you are instead of having to restart the entire stage. Those continues are shared, though, so if one player uses them all up, that's all you get.

The chiptune music and pixelated visuals both nail the distinctly early '90s arcade era, but not always in a good way. At times the catchy music can feel a bit too repetitive, and the colorful background visuals can make things like platforms and projectiles difficult to see. If this sounds frustrating to you, it likely will be.

But Tanuki Justice doesn't successfully replicate classics like Ghosts 'N Goblins just by making things hard, it's also really fun. Sure, it's rage-inducing, but it's entertaining enough to keep you coming back for more.

That said, the "more" aspect is where things fall short. Tanuki Justice is incredibly brief. Once you've played through it a couple of times, it's possible to beat the main campaign in under 15 minutes. But this was obviously never intended to be a game you play through and beat once. It's about pattern recognition and figuring out the best way to get through as quickly and stylishly as possible. It's made to be replayed. That kind of thing is absolutely not for everyone, so if you're expecting something like Mega Man, you'll likely be disappointed by the game's brevity.

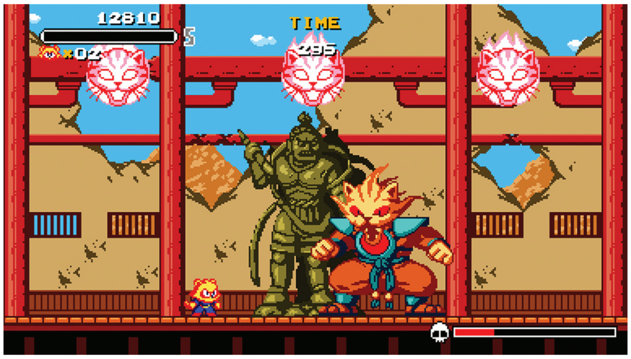
There is an unlockable challenge mode where you have to see how long you can survive against an endless onslaught of enemies, and another mode I couldn't unlock because did I mention this game is HARD?!?

Tanuki Justice is a real "your mileage may vary" type of situation. Only you can decide if you'll get $14.99 worth of enjoyment out of it, but if it sounds like your kind of fun, it's really good at what it does.

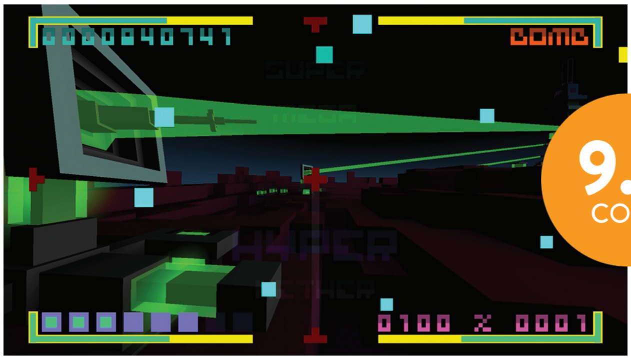
– KRIS

7.0

SWITCH PUBLISHER: NO GRAVITY GAMES DEVELOPER: WONDERBOY BOBI RATING: E10+



9.0
BEAT



9.5
CORE

CommanderVideo Games

BIT.TRIP BEAT, CORE, VOID, RUNNER, FATE & FLUX

YOU CAN PROBABLY count the big "breakout" hits from WiiWare on one hand. While the Wii itself was a massive hit, its online storefront was not. Despite its incredibly catchy music, people just didn't want to log on to Nintendo's first download-only marketplace. When it comes to the Bit.Trip series, though, people made an exception. Maybe it's because, like the Wii Shop Channel, the music was too good to ignore?

From there, the series went to even more amazing places. It's been represented in Smash (with a trophy) and No More Heroes (with a T-shirt), and has even rubbed elbows with the Katamari Damacy series (via an iPhone port of BEAT) and Charles Martinet, the voice of Mario himself (who played himself in the two Bit.Trip RUNNER sequels). Now, Switch owners have been invited to take a ride on the full Bit.Trip themselves, and it's a tour through life and death that has only gotten more compelling over the years. It can take you back to the Atari 2600 games that inspired it, but now it'll also inspire nostalgia for 2009, the year when the series debuted. It was a more innocent time for gaming, the Internet and everything else, and for the most part, these ports do a great job of transporting you there.

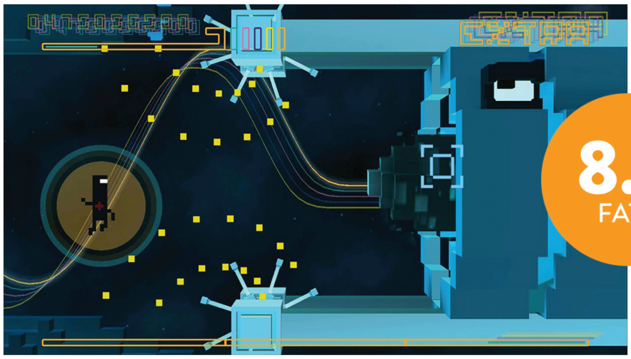
The games star CommanderVideo, a strange TV-headed alien – and this may be the only game franchise in history that starts as the lead is about to be conceived, and ends after his body has died and his soul heads to the next plane. In BEAT, the Commander's essence, traveling through the galaxy, gathers physical matter so that he can be born. It's a simple, sidescrolling dot-bouncing game, in the spirit of Arkanoid and Super Breakout, but set to a rhythm that helps guide your hand. CORE, the next game in the series, is basically Dance Dance Revolution for your thumbs; a pure rhythm game that has you stitching together dots as you form the Commander's new body, with a few references to Missle Command and Asteroids thrown in for good measure. VOID is a sort of shoot-'em-up without shooting, tasking you to eat up black dots while avoiding white ones. It's the first game in the series that lets you move in all directions, showing the Commander's baby steps into the world outside, learning to manage his urges as he goes.

Those steps speed up to a sprint in RUNNER, the most popular game in the series. It's an auto-runner (surprise!), but unlike others in that genre, it has a definitive end, and multiple boss fights along the way. It's about the Commander's boundless energy and optimism, which finally come to an end in FATE; a 2D on-rails shooter that ties him to a specific path that concludes – as all lives do. Then, after his body is gone, FLUX takes him back to the same playstyle and feel as BEAT, sending him backward into the nether as he reflects on all he learned in life.

If all that sounds a little too weird for you, forget I said anything! All you really need to know is that each Bit.Trip plays like a rhythm/action hybrid of its respective genre, fusing art and music in a transportive way that's more about pure fun and less about a concrete story. I only know all this stuff about what the games mean because of all the years I've spent playing them and talking to their creators.

SWITCH PUBLISHER: QUBICGAMES DEVELOPER: CHOICE PROVISIONS RATING: E

9.5
RUNNER



8.5
FATE

8.0
VOID

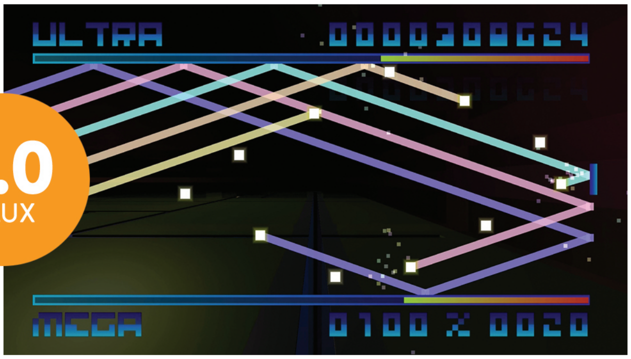
So naturally, I went into these ports with high expectations. The originals were designed for the Wii from the ground up, so I assumed the Bit.Trip games would run great on Switch – what with the Joy-Con being the smaller, cuter, more versatile child of the Wii Remote and all. That just goes to show what can happen when you assume! Two of the games, BEAT and FLUX, were motion control-only on the Wii, and the same is true here. But instead of holding the controller on its side, you hold it straight out, bending your wrist (or wrists, if playing portably) to move your paddle. You'll need to recalibrate pretty regularly, which is as easy as pushing a button – but even then, the controls may suddenly invert on you during a heated moment and it could all go to pot. Thankfully, like all the games in this collection, you can adjust the difficulty on the menu screen, so even with the occasional controller failure, you'll be able to see all of BEAT and FLUX if you choose to take it easy, but the need for that concession is a bummer. To be clear, the controls work. They're just harder to work than in the Wii originals.

As for the games themselves, BEAT, CORE, RUNNER and FLUX are still my favorites. I'll have to ding BEAT and FLUX a point due to the control issues, but the games themselves are near perfect, as are CORE and RUNNER. VOID is great too, with a gameplay hook that's nothing short of genius, but the music and visuals just aren't as memorable as the rest. Conversely, FATE looks and sounds great, but it drops a lot of the rhythm-action elements, and loses some specialness along with them.

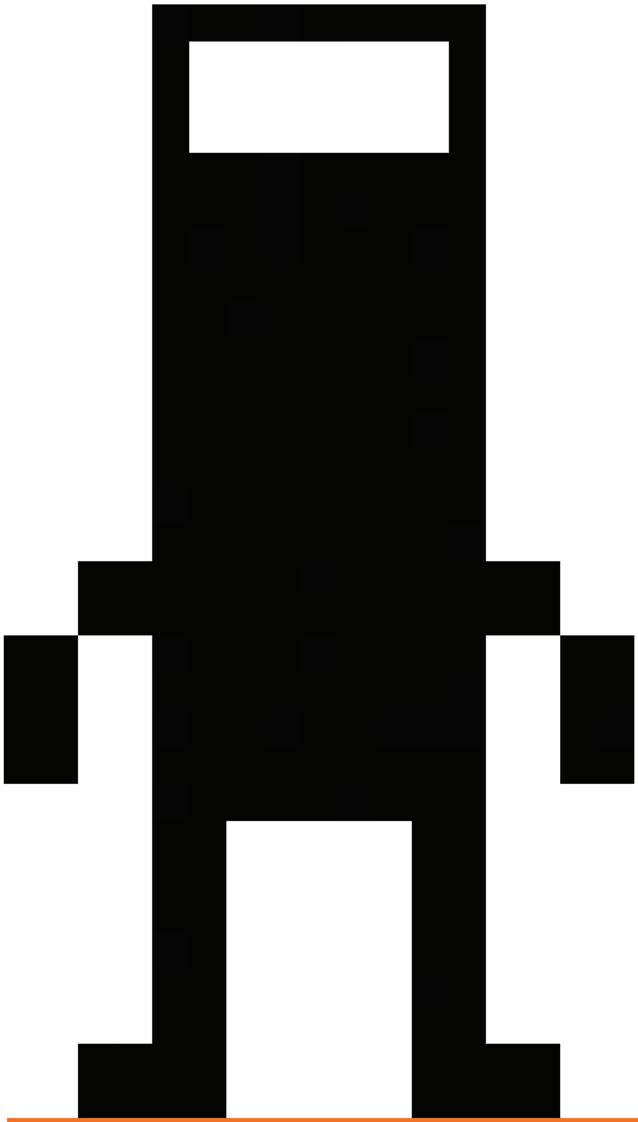
The bonus challenge stages included in each game and the discount you get on the other five after purchasing your first title (bringing the cost to all six games to under $15!), are icing on the cake.

Rarely has a series offered such variety between its individual entries while still working as a cohesive whole. This whole set is a must-have for rhythm/action fans!

Now, let's cross our fingers that this set of six ports might be followed by just one more . . . the whole CommanderVideo saga is now on Switch except for Bit.Trip Presents . . . Runner2: Future Legend of Rhythm Alien! **– JONATHAN**



9.0
FLUX



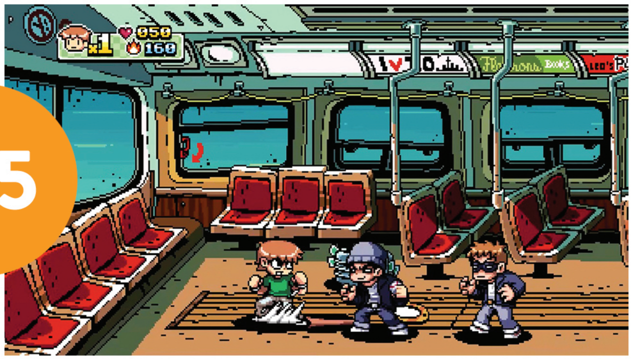
SAVE WHEN YOU BUY IN BULK!

DIGITAL SWITCH SALES are a dime a dozen.

Almost literally! Now four years removed from the launch of Nintendo's innovative home console/portable hybrid, its eShop is flooded with over 3,000 different games – each one trying to elbow all the others out of the spotlight and earn your attention and your cash. On a weekly basis, dozens more go on sale for the first time, and hundreds of the existing wares are deeply discounted. It's become incredibly difficult for any one game to stand out from the crowd – and even then, a prospective purchaser might hold off on pulling the trigger since we're being conditioned to wait for savings events.

Thankfully, this set of six Bit.Trip Switch ports is doing something new to avoid that pitfall: Each game is individually priced at $4.99, but if you buy just one, all five others will instantly get marked down by 60% in the digital storefront. So you don't have to wait around for a sale: You can own the full set of six for $14.94 total!

8.5



Revived and Relisted

SCOTT PILGRIM VS. THE WORLD: THE GAME – COMPLETE EDITION

A DECADE AGO, Scott Pilgrim vs. The World: The Game was released. Just over four years later, it was pulled from the online services that offered it, and there was much regret. I was one such person to lament not getting the game when I had the chance.

Part of the reason for that is because, while I'm a fan of the Scott Pilgrim series of graphic novels, the game represented something more. Despite being "the most populous city in Canada and the fourth most populous city in North America," according to Wikipedia, Toronto doesn't tend to see a lot of screen time in video games, barring technicalities that might come with some sports titles. This was a chance to play a game on the streets of my home, and yet, I would end up allowing the opportunity to enjoy such a unique experience pass me by, much to my eternal regret.

As it turns out, eternity isn't quite as long as advertised. Now, thanks to word count-slayer Scott Pilgrim vs. The World: The Game – Complete Edition, I and everyone else who missed out now have a second chance to plant our feet on the digital streets of T-Dot and throw some fists and snowballs between cups of coffee and bowls of poutine.

Suffice it to say, the game does a good job of capturing The Six in a cartoony video game form – all the more impressive when you consider that it wasn't even developed by Ubisoft Toronto (they wouldn't open their doors until the month following the game's release). From the snowy streets to the epic battle atop a mostly faithful (if a bit larger than real life) TTC street car, with loonies and toonies dropping from fallen foes, a lot of it hits home in the best of ways. (Alas, no Honest Ed's, though that's sadly since become the case in real life as well).

The gameplay supports up to four players locally or online, meshing stylish pixel art and a rad chiptune soundtrack with old-school beat-'em-up gameplay that borrows a bit from the likes of River City Ransom and the NES Double Dragons (to say nothing of the copious references to other games) to encourage repeated playthroughs. Put another way: You might have to grind a bit in order to earn money and experience points to improve your stats so you'll stand a better chance in the later stages.

Even on "Average Joe" difficulty, the game is tough when you start out at Level 1. Fortunately, there are codes, bugs and exploits you can utilize to your advantage, and characters' stats carry over to other modes as well, giving an overall sense of progression that ties them together into a more cohesive whole.

The game isn't perfect, as there are bugs to contend with, but they're rarely game-breaking. I've seen the online mode lamented quite a bit since the game's release, but aside from the odd hiccup, it gave me little trouble, as I nearly completed it from the beginning in this mode.

Just having this game available again makes it a 10 in terms of recommendation to anyone who felt like they missed out the first time. But that aside, it gets a good (albeit sentimental) 8.5 from me. **– DAVID**

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: UBISOFT RATING: T

8.0

Bro Down While You Throw Down

DOUBLE DRAGON NEON

DOUBLE DRAGON IV was a sad excuse for a nostalgia cash-grab that had the gall to call itself a numbered sequel. Recent titles like River City Girls and Streets of Rage 4 demonstrate how it's possible to balance retro game feel with streamlined enhancements. In reality, Double Dragon already received such an update back in 2012 – and now Switch owners get to throw hands alongside the Lee brothers in Double Dragon Neon!

Neon isn't a particularly gorgeous game, populated as it is by stiff CGI puppets plastered atop flat, static backgrounds. What it lacks in looks, though, it makes up for in muscle. You've got your basic punch and kick, a grab and a jump, of course. Then comes the secret sauce – a crouch for ducking incoming attacks, dodge rolling or linking into a leg sweep or rising knee. And should you duck at the right moment, you'll enter a temporary Gleam state during which your attacks deal double damage.

When I originally played Neon, I tackled the first couple of Missions without paying much mind to the crouch's versatility – and paid for it with a mouth full of shattered enamel. Once I became more conscious of the commands at my disposal, I was stringing together sick combos in spectacular fashion.

Adding to the medley are Mix Tapes, which can be equipped to bestow special techniques like the Fireball or the One-Inch Punch, as well as stat-boosting Stances that grant buffs like increased weapon proficiency or HP siphoning. It's a combat system that's basic yet bursting with possibilities, adding a delicious layer of strategy to an otherwise straightforward brawler.

Neon's true claim to fame is how it takes the original games' '80s martial arts film flavor and amps the cheese up to 11. Billy and Jimmy speak with California surfer lingo and rip sick air guitar riffs, while bosses like the Mega Man knock-off Mecha Biker and the Little Shop of Horrors-inspired Marian II are an absolute joy to pound into the pavement. But the biggest show-stealer of all is the main villain Skullmageddon, who talks like Skeletor while whipping out fourth wall-breaking banter and bone puns. ("Time to make a *marrow* escape!")

And let's not forget Jake "Virt" Kaufman's killer soundtrack, stacked with arrangements of classic Double Dragon tunes and original compositions that pay homage to the artists of the era, such as Van Halen, David Bowie and even Rick Astley. As corny as some of the vocal tracks are, you can't deny that they're also super catchy – "Neon Jungle" is a legit club banger, and Skullmageddon's end credits ballad cements him as one of the best baddies of the past decade!

For all it achieves, Double Dragon Neon nonetheless commits a few beat-'em-up genre sins, such as frequent repeat enemy encounters and platforming sequences that feel out of place. It's also a major oversight that Mix Tape shops are located within Missions instead of on the overworld map, meaning you have to play through a portion of some random zone just to buy or upgrade gear. And local-only co-op? In 2021?

Big whoop! I still award it two "Radicals" and a "Righteous"!

– TONY

SWITCH PUBLISHER: MAJESCO
DEVELOPER: WAYFORWARD
RATING: T

Harpoon Hero

OLIJA

FARADAY'S CAGED. Literally, at one point early in this tale – but figuratively all throughout. A young lord of a fishing village on the verge of starvation when the fish population precipitously declines, he sets off on a journey to seek a solution alongside a handful of his remaining able-bodied men. All of them end up entrapped in a different sense after a storm and shipwreck scatters them across a chain of unfamiliar islands, though – so it's up to Lord Faraday to find his missing men, free them from the actual cages they're stuck in and ultimately figure out a way to bring them all back home alive. A tall order. Happily, he has a harpoon.

A magic harpoon! Faraday comes across a polearm with the power of teleportation. When the harpoon is flung across the screen and connects with a distant target – an enemy, a crate or most anything else solid enough to be impaled – he can then instantly zip his body to the super spear's position.

It's incredibly satisfying. You know that a game is going to be fun to play when it really nails its main character's method of locomotion, and Olija is a blast in even its blandest scenes, as Faraday only needs a handful of boxes scattered about to be able to fling and zing like The Flash tied to a tether.

What's more, the harpoon's normal nature as a weapon is not ignored, as it proves to be perfectly versatile in battle as well. You can see a foe approaching from afar, execute a javelin toss to strike them at a distance, teleport into their face, pluck the harpoon out of their body and then wield it like a windmill to melee their remaining health away in seconds flat. Again, satisfying.

Structurally, Olija is Metroidvania-esque, as it plays out across levels that are freely traversable and interconnected, but not entirely so – different islands remain separate from one another and moving between them means taking rides across a world map on the ferry of a kindly old boatman. In the center of the map: a home base island that begins as a ramshackle collection of collapsed cabins, but ultimately grows into a thriving central village as Faraday rescues more and more castaways and each one brings their unique skills to the tiny town. It's a fine measure of progression, though not as jovial as similar settlements in, say, Shovel Knight, since the tone in Olija always seems to stay on the dark and broody side.

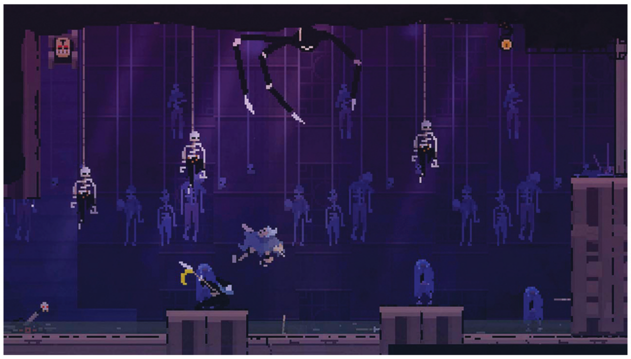
The game doesn't take itself *totally* seriously, as Faraday's most impactful upgrades are a series of ridiculous-looking hats he can wear that do manage to break through the murk of the story and the setting. But things are otherwise dreary and gruesome – the violence depicted here might also be too extreme for some to handle, were the visuals not all rendered in intentionally abstract ways.

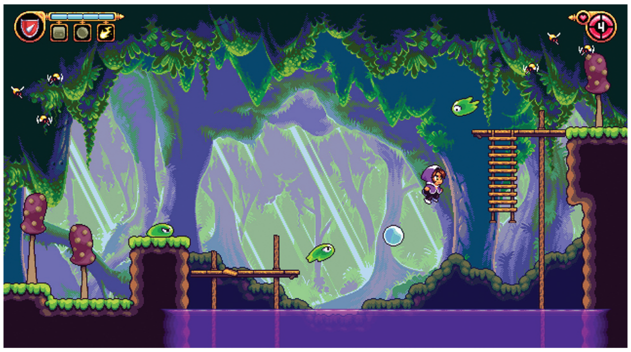
That's another minor negative – the low-res, old-school Prince of Persia-ish graphics are sometimes so low-res that it's hard to tell what some objects are. Coins – crucial to gather – are just tiny pixel squares that are easy to miss in the jumble of crowded environments. Sometimes background elements blend in too much with foreground platforms, which made me miss the path forward a time or two. Still, the fluidity of the style is superb, and especially the physics of the magic harpoon. It may seem archaic in still shots, but it animates beautifully.

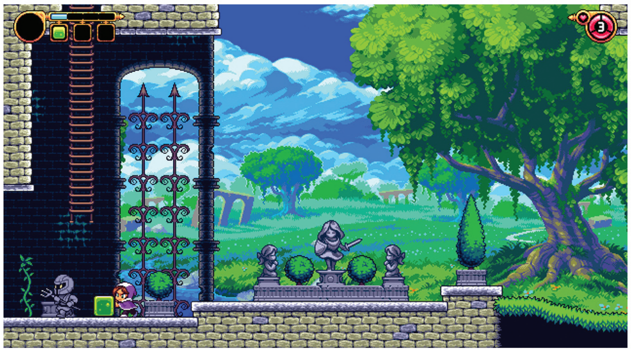
Lord Faraday needs to lighten up, but flinging his harpoon around feels great regardless. **– LUCAS**

8.0

SWITCH PUBLISHER: DEVOLVER DIGITAL DEVELOPER: SKELETON CREW STUDIOS RATING: T







An Excellent Sophomore Effort

ALWA'S LEGACY

VIDEO GAME COMFORT FOOD. That's what I kept thinking as I played through the adventure of Alwa's Legacy. This is the kind of video game that defines what video games are all about – an engaging, entertaining break from reality and an opportunity to explore a colorful new world.

Well, not entirely new. Alwa's Legacy is the sequel to Alwa's Awakening, and it takes place in the same world as that original journey – but everything has been jazzed up with about five times more visual flare. Awakening was made with the "intentional 8-bit" style that sought to clone the aesthetics of the NES era, but this follow-up releases those restrictions and just goes wild with glorious, detailed backgrounds and immersion-enhancing lighting effects – while still being crafted from carefully considered pixel art at its core.

This is only the second release from Elden Pixels, a team comprised of veterans of other studios, like Image & Form. It's clear that their experience with past projects at previous jobs and then having the foundation of Alwa's Awakening to build on combined to fuel this one, as it's a really excellent sophomore effort that has me excited about what we'll see from these same creative minds in the future.

As before, this is a Metroidvania quest starring a wand-wielding spell-caster named Zoe. (Not Alwa. Alwa is the name of the land she explores, not the protagonist herself. I know, it's odd – like how Celeste was the name of the mountain and not the mountain climber.) Anyway, Not-Alwa can bash baddies with her wand to cause basic blunt force trauma, but it's mostly called upon to cast three core spells to propel exploration: One spawns a green block to help her reach higher platforms, the second spawns a bubble (. . . that also helps her jump up higher) and the third shoots out a little blast of lightning to attack distant foes or activate far-off switches.

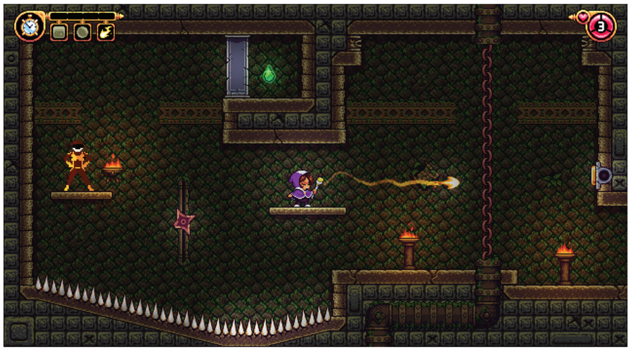
One of my criticisms of the first Alwa game was that Zoe's block and bubble spells were too similar; they redundantly served the same role of increasing her vertical movement range. This time around, the two are thankfully more differentiated. After you gather Orbs and upgrade their power, the block gains the abilities to be flung into far walls to create an extra surface to stand on, to be used as an attack when sent hurling at foes and to even become a bomb that opens up new pathways to explore. The bubble, meanwhile, gains its own attacking capability and ultimately becomes unburstable, allowing you to float up and reach the highest secrets in the game. The lightning spell gets upgrades too, and altogether Zoe ends up with a lot more functionality from the same set of three spells.

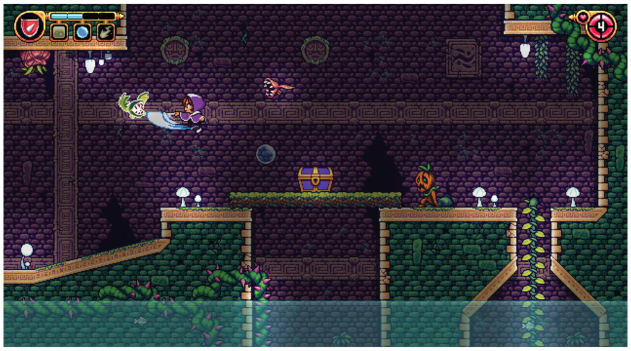
And then there's more beyond that! A new set of secondary powers allows her to do things like safely step on spiked surfaces and slow down the flow of time temporarily. There ends up being a lot more to do and play around with here than there was in the first game.

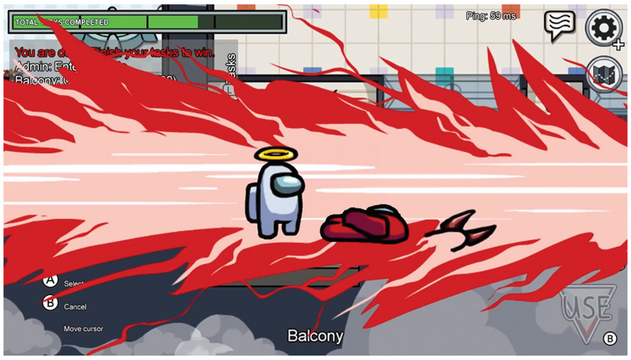
Combine those fresh gameplay additions with the aforementioned visual overhaul and a souped-up soundtrack and it's almost like Alwa's Legacy is a reboot/reworking of Alwa's Awakening, even though that game is itself just a few years old. It's like both were made from the same design document, but this one had more development time and a bigger budget, so it's fancier and more fully featured. But whatever the behind-the-scenes reality was, the final product here is great, and it's given me a greater appreciation for its predecessor too. Find some comfort for yourself with either one! **– LUCAS**

8.5

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: ELDEN PIXELS RATING: E







There is an Impostor . . .

AMONG US

WITHOUT A DOUBT, 2020 was the bleakest year in living memory. The spread of COVID-19 forced the entire planet to shelter in place, without the company of loved ones to provide much-needed solace – thus we sought to reconnect via teleconferencing, social media and, of course, online gaming. Animal Crossing: New Horizons and Fall Guys certainly benefited from this new normal, but it was Among Us that became king of the quarantine crew – two years after its original release, no less!

On the surface, Among Us is so deceptively simple that its popularity defies explanation. Up to 10 local or online players explore one of three (soon to be four) maps, aiming to complete Tasks before one to three random Impostors snuff out their lights. These Tasks take the form of basic minigames – uploading documents, entering a security code, reconnecting broken wiring and so on – meant more as distractions from potential doom than serious challenges.

Once a dead body is reported or an emergency meeting called, all Crewmates swap alibis to prove their innocence or deflect suspicion, and in the end a vote is held to see who, if anyone, will be ejected. This is the genius of Among Us: live people, locked in a battle of wits, scrutinizing each others' thought processes and idiosyncrasies to gauge their trustworthiness. Each successive round is a fresh whodunit, and the more intimate you are with your party members, the more wild the twists and turns will be.

Crafting the ideal game conditions does require a bit of legwork. In particular, Among Us lacks voice chat – a necessity for a game so reliant on communication. Smartphone and PC users may be able to skirt this via in-game texting, but trying to operate the Switch's native keyboard with a controller is an exercise in madness. Instead, you'll want to use a third-party messaging app like Discord; given that all versions of the game support cross-play, everyone can play on the platform of their choice while maintaining voice connections. (This also means that, unless you own a Switch-compatible keyboard peripheral, online play with randoms is functionally pointless in Nintendo's ecosystem.)

I don't blame InnerSloth for such shortcomings, though, as the three-person cell couldn't possibly have imagined that their baby would reach such lofty heights so long after its debut. We needed an experience like Among Us to cope with the events of the previous year, and its emergent possibilities ensure that we'll continue to enjoy it for many months or years to come.

But merely describing how Among Us plays doesn't accurately convey the types of experiences it births, which is why on January 15, three of my Nintendo Force compatriots and I invited some NF Patreon supporters for some super sus shenanigans. Before we deliver our individual reports, I'd like to thank Sophie23, Hyruleguy, ChaoticTeal, Luxe, Mordio3, Ekat09, PSWii2008 and Super64 for spending a few hours with us. Let's backstab one another again soon! **– TONY**

8.5

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: INNERSLOTH RATING: E10+

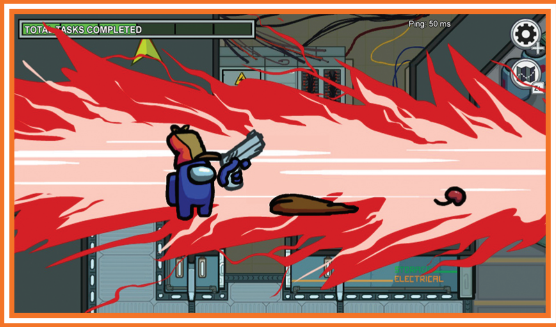
REBECCA'S CREW REPORT

I DIDN'T DO IT!

THE NIGHT I organized our group Among Us session, I was extremely nervous about everything going right – but it ended up being one of the most entertaining nights I've ever had gaming! I usually play with my friends over Steam using the in-game text chat against strangers, which is fun until you run into people acting obnoxious. Getting a whole group of 10 together to play in a private server using a Discord voice channel is such a different experience that it changed my perspective on Among Us altogether.

The funniest moment of the evening happened when we started a round on the MIRA HQ map. While I went to perform my Task on the left of the dropship gate, almost everyone else went to perform the Task on the right – and when I was done, SURPRISE, DEAD BODY! We were all laughing while trying to figure out who went where and who was doing what. (I believe that was the first game of Tony's killing spree.) I also had some fun during my turn as Impostor, despite some missteps – like thinking one of my kills in Electrical was out of Kris' range of vision while he worked on the distributor. (Aw, beans!)

Playing Among Us on the Switch is not without its hiccups – I would appreciate a more helpful, less technobabble-laden error message when I'm unable to form a room, for example – and while the interface translates well to button usage, forget about using the in-game chat if you're on a Pro Controller. Despite all that, it was a whole lot of fun, and I highly recommend going the voice chat route. – **REBECCA**



TONY'S CREW REPORT

IT WASN'T ME!

BE VEWY, VEWY QUIET! *I'm a powah-hungwy sociopath!*

I learned early on that I'm not an effective Crewmate. Even when I did feel comfortable pointing blame at others, I had been so focused on Tasks that I couldn't provide accurate eyewitness testimony. But as an Impostor? Oh, what wicked webs of deception I weave! The bonds of trust I so callously sever!

I remember my crowning performance vividly: It was my second run as Impostor, paired this time with Mordio3, and we had all spawned on the Launchpad of MIRA HQ. Poor, naive Kris lagged behind as the rest of the crew waddled down the hall, so I picked him clean before popping into a nearby vent and emerging in the Greenhouse as though I'd always been there. Minutes passed before his corpse was discovered; I simply kept mum as the multi-colored meat puppets fell into confusion.

Ejection felt certain after I had claimed my latest prize in the Laboratory only to turn around and find PSWii2008 gazing in disbelief. He called a meeting to disclose my crime, but his nervous disposition gave the peanut gallery pause and gave me the chance to explain how I only just discovered the body myself and missed being the one to report it. Inconclusive, the poor saps surmised. "Let's all skip voting for now."

What became of those fools? The fools who had caught me red-handed yet were swayed by a dash of confidence and a pinch of misdirection? Mordio3 and I slaughtered every last one of them! Taste despair, you feeble worms, and fall before your executioner! – **TONY**

KRIS' CREW REPORT

DON'T LOOK AT ME!

AS THIS EVENING of Among Us was among only a handful of times I'd played, I was still rather unsure of how to approach things. My fellow Crewmates zoomed past me with purpose and precise knowledge of where different areas of each map were located. Meanwhile, I found myself wandering in circles, just trying to keep up. I lagged behind my brightly colored brethren hoping to learn from their example, but they always seemed to quickly scatter, and I often found myself alone. This process repeated itself several times, and typically concluded the same way: with me being murdered.

Occasionally I wouldn't be the first victim and I'd stumble across a dead body myself, call a meeting and try to figure out exactly who I could and couldn't trust. This was always a fascinating exercise with alibis and falsehoods hurled in every direction, but nothing could have prepared me for one murder in particular. It all happened so fast that I don't remember the specifics of the situation, but at some point the entire crew found themselves standing in almost the exact same place. There was a lot of chatter going on in the coms, and then suddenly, right in front of all of us, SPLAT! A body hit the floor!

We were all right there, we all saw it, but since we were all so close together, none of us could tell who had cast the killing blow! We were all forced to move on without ejecting anybody, but the rest of the match was more intense than ever.

At least, I assume it was. I was killed again shortly thereafter. – **KRIS**

BRETT'S CREW REPORT

I DID IT. IT WAS ME.

I HAVE SUCCESSFULLY deceived the fools aboard this decrepit ship. By feigning connectivity issues and skipping the first few rounds, I escaped identification and am now among the filthy humans. Their stink is abhorrent. I must eradicate them!

Why must these disgusting mouth breathers insist on partnering up? Social animals are the worst sort of beast. They even gave each other a cute nickname: Accountabilibuddy! I must avoid detection and somehow separate them so I can go in for the kill. Another of my kind is with me, but she has been found out! It seems these cowards simply eject us from the ship. What a cruel fate, floating listlessly until the oxygen runs out. So, it comes down to me. Time for some sabotage and light murder.

I'll play along and make it appear as if I am fixing the reactor that I myself sabotaged. Then, when one of these malodorous creatures breaks off for a menial Task I will strike with my jagged tongue and release them from their mortal coil! . . . That was satisfying.

They seem to always have means of communicating with each other. They found my kill. Now I have to make up excuses and remember which of these pathetic mammals I was near so I can confuse them! It should be easy to confuse a Terran's feeble organic processor.

They appear to be fooled, but they are completing more Tasks by the moment. If they reach Task completion before I am able to relieve them of their life force, I will fail. I must endeavor to let my bloodlust drive the remaining moments . . . *What?! Time's up?!* – **BRETT**

Mush!

THE RED LANTERN

I LOVE ALASKA.

I've only been there once – my wife and I got to enjoy a just-the-two-of-us vacation away from the pressures of parenting for a week four years ago – but it was the best trip we've ever taken. The beauty of the land is unmatched by any other I've ever seen. We hope to go back some day! But while we wait for that opportunity to arise, I can at least relive a bit of the magic by playing The Red Lantern.

This is a combination resource management and narrative adventure game. You step into the boots of a nameless young woman who needs a serious change of scenery in her life – so she decides to take up the sport of dogsledding in Alaska. With no previous experience. It's probably not the best plan, but it's an adventure, and she's diving into it.

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: TIMBERLINE STUDIO RATING: T

This pioneering protagonist is portrayed by the acclaimed Ashly Burch, and her vocal performance earnestly sells the entire premise. You can hear the sadness behind her words as she sets off, driving north into the unknown. She tries to keep herself feeling hopeful, talking both to herself and her team of sled dogs with reassurance from the beginning of their expedition all the way to its inevitable end . . . and it's just superb all throughout. This is so clearly a young woman who recognized her need to get away from her normal life and try something new, but then got herself in way over her head – in the middle of a frozen wilderness.

Half of the experience is listening to this young woman's inner monologue as she charges forward, then second-guesses herself, then moves on again. The other half is making the decisions that guide her journey. You choose which dogs she brings with her on the trip. You decide which way they mush once they're out in the wild. You make the call on when to keep going, when to rest, when to hunt for food and when to risk going hungry.

And then you fail.

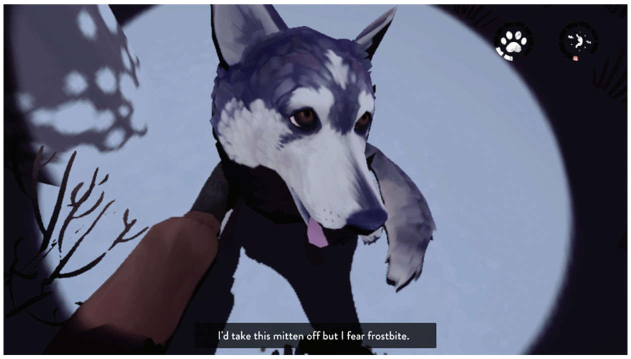
I didn't realize it at first, so my first run in The Red Lantern was much more intense in my mind than it probably should have been. But you're meant to lose. Our out-of-her-depth hero is literally too unprepared to complete a full run from the start, so starvation somewhere out in the middle of nowhere is inevitable. I didn't know that. I thought the game was unbalanced or too random in its selection of which events the musher encounters, so my first impression wasn't the best one.

It was an intended negativity, though. After your first failure, the game explains its roguelike nature to you outright: You'll fail time and time again, but with every run, the young musher learns more and more, and then she becomes better prepared for subsequent attempts. (She's not coming back to life; narratively it's all explained away as her having nightmares every time she fails a run. Only the final triumphant one is the one that "really" happens.)

Once I understood the loop, I was much more in for the full dogsled story. And later runs become more fun, since the team starts out with more supplies – for example, I found a fishing pole in the wild during my first run. It was an invaluable tool for securing extra food, which is always a struggle since hunger's constantly creeping in. When I failed that run and got sent back to the start, our hero remembered the pole's usefulness from her dream and then wisely made the decision to pack fishing gear from the beginning in all subsequent attempts. Little by little, she learns.

And that's a great lesson to take away: When you try something new, you're never going to get it right right away. You can't. You're incapable of doing so from the start. But if you persist – if you stand firm and keep pushing forward, learning bit by bit from each new failure, you'll ultimately understand how to win. You'll succeed. **– LUCAS**

8.5



8.5

Jesper's Majestic Jewelry
EMBRACELET

SOMETIMES IT JUST takes a small moment to make a big impact on your life.

Norwegian teenager Jesper encounters this truth over and over again in the charming narrative adventure game, Embracelet, from Mattis Folkestad and Machineboy.

This concept is also illustrated by the game itself. Its six- to seven-hour playtime is short, but in that time, it packs a serious emotional punch with themes of love, loss, friendship and change.

At the story's start, players will find Jesper in a bit of a rut. He's lonely and set to spend the entire summer studying because he failed an important test. His prospects change after his ailing grandfather Leif gives him a magical bracelet and tasks him with returning it to Slepp, the northern Norwegian island where he grew up many years ago.

Much of Embracelet's gameplay involves examining objects and using the bracelet to move them around, which creates cool puzzle opportunities as you explore Slepp. As you interact with different objects, you can move obstacles out of your way, repair broken structures and access new areas. If you don't interact with objects in a certain order, you won't succeed in your given objectives.

For example, one task involves saving a whale who's beached on the island. The bracelet can't return the whale to water by itself, but you can use it to move equipment and clear debris from a nearby river, allowing the water to push the whale back into the sea.

While the gameplay is relatively simple, the puzzles and their varying complexity kept the game from getting stale. The main thing to keep in mind is that you will need to observe every environment with a keen eye in order to see everything at Jesper and the bracelet's disposal.

The island of Slepp also offers players several areas to explore and people to talk to. Navigating can be difficult when playing portably. Sometimes when you leave one area and enter another, your perspective changes to a different angle, and these transitions are much smoother in TV Mode. Beyond this issue, the game looks and performs well in both modes, and I can only recall one minor glitch while playing.

Slepp's inhabitants offer Embracelet's greatest strength and help the game's narrative tug at the hearts of players. As Jesper, your actions and dialogue choices will affect your relationships with the people you meet, and they're a varied bunch.

A few highlights include Leif's former girlfriend Irene and a military veteran who has an adorable dog named Issi. You also meet Karoline and Hermod, two teenagers who immediately bond with Jesper and show him the island.

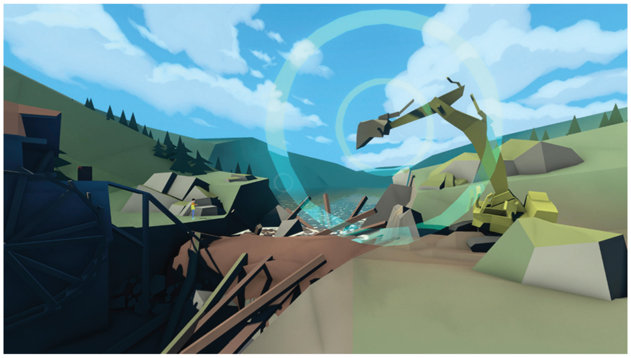
My favorite part of the game was watching Jesper's relationships with Karoline and Hermod grow. While Embracelet is a short game, the writing and dialogue provide just enough details for players to connect with these three and watch their friendship deepen in the course of a week.

Jesper's mission of returning the bracelet requires him to assist the people of Slepp he meets along the way. As you complete tasks for them, you slowly learn Slepp's history and, more importantly, the secrets Jesper's grandfather has kept hidden for years regarding the bracelet.

It would've been easy for Embracelet's story to wrap up after Jesper discovers the truth about his grandfather, but it doesn't. The mystery continues, and the twists and turns leading up to the end provide an unpredictable, yet satisfying conclusion to Jesper's journey.

What a sweet game! Perfect for a relaxing Saturday. **— MAGGIE**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: MACHINEBOY
DEVELOPER: MATTIS FOLKESTAD
RATING: T



5.5

Dead Meat

SUPER MEAT BOY FOREVER

AROUND A DECADE ago, Super Meat Boy completely took the world by storm. After a relatively high-key release on the Xbox 360, there basically wasn't a platform you couldn't find Super Meat Boy on. Team Meat had a bonafide classic on their hands, and they helped usher in a new era for Xbox Live Arcade. Edmund McMillen and Tommy Refenes worked their magic together and came up with a tight original platformer with a killer soundtrack by Danny Baranowsky (that was later replaced with less memorable tunes in future ports). It was phenomenal.

Super Meat Boy Forever doesn't have that same spark.

Before you get too excited, Super Meat Boy Forever isn't really a full-on sequel. Instead of carefully crafted levels, from start to finish, this game is randomly generated. Now, I should note: They are still manually crafted segments. They're just strung together at random. Add in an auto-running system that's been custom-tailored to mobile platforms, and you have yourself a completely different experience.

The shift isn't necessarily bad on paper – a lot of IPs have evolved with the times, after all. But this formula doesn't really work as well for Super Meat Boy. My main issue is just a lack of identity. Levels in the original Super Meat Boy were burned into my brain – even if I finished them in a single try. But in Super Meat Boy Forever, so many stages feel so homogenized that they all just blend together. Even the bosses feel formulaic at times and aren't very memorable after repeated attempts to best them.

As someone who really craves a challenge, Super Meat Boy scratched that itch because everything felt deliberate. It had a purpose. If a particular part was too tough, you could talk about it with people, come up with a plan, and execute it. With enough practice, you could rise above. And the developers clearly had that milestone-like approach in mind.

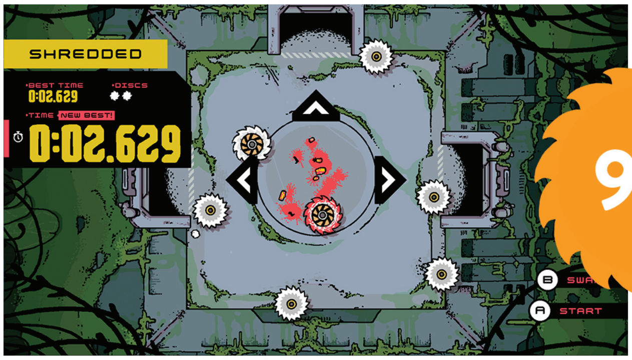
But with Super Meat Boy Forever, your best bet is to try and get a hold on bite-sized concepts and mechanical timing-based movements – so when certain hazards do arise randomly, you can tackle them with that newfound knowledge. The thing is, you're randomly going to be tested in Forever. Sometimes you don't need any of that skillset; sometimes you need little chunks in rapid succession. It's chaotic, but not with a particularly fun delivery system.

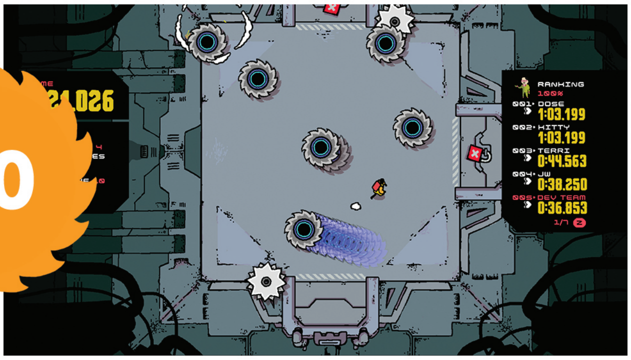
One of my biggest issues is the lack of control over Meat Boy. Precision was a cornerstone of the original. Now, when it's tough to turn around and get your bearings unless you have exactly the right landscape. That precision is lost. Running/leaping backward and instantly dying on the left side of the screen is particularly extremely noninteractive.

As soon as I was done with my first run of Super Meat Boy Forever, I had no desire to go through it again. It's a stark contrast to the original, where I couldn't wait to 100% every meticulously designed nook and cranny, and tackle all of the bonuses and secrets therein. The soundtrack and art style unfortunately didn't help draw me back in either.

I don't know if there could have been a compromise of design that I would have settled for with Super Meat Boy Forever. Even somewhat dated on arrival, the idea of a randomly generated auto-runner just seems at odds with the legacy of Meat Boy itself. As-is, you're probably better off just grabbing a fresh copy of the original and giving it another go instead, for old times' sake. **– CHRIS**

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: TEAM MEAT RATING: T





9.0

Blade Running

DISC ROOM

MEAT ISN'T THE only thing on the menu for saw blade-addled adventurers looking for something new in the Switch eShop. Where Super Meat Boy Forever takes the danger of power tools to the land of procedurally generated auto-running platformers, Disc Room takes a top-down approach to the action, giving you more freedom to move wherever you choose (but with even more hazards to go with it!).

In the near future, a giant saw blade appears in space. Upon investigating this alien apparatus, our hero the explorer discovers two things: First, this saw is filled with little rooms, each one filled with even more saws; Second, if they die (cut up by one of these spinning death merchants), they can come right back to life. In fact, sometimes the only way to get new abilities is to let yourself be sliced up! See a saw that can dash? Let it dismember you, and maybe after you resurrect in a few seconds, you'll gain its powers.

There's a whole laundry list of similar skills you gain throughout the game (the power to slow down time, to clone yourself, to absorb saws into your body before they can kill you) though you can only use one at a time, preventing you from ever feeling too powerful. Likewise, there is a massive amount of different saws in the game. Some can teleport, others have babies, still others have massive pulsating brains and the ability to scream with rage!

These and other "boss saws" need to be taken down by collecting little baubles of amber that, for some mysterious reason, damage them when amassed by the player. The reason for that, and many of the game's other mysteries, are slowly revealed through short, comic-style "cut" scenes that play after meeting particular benchmarks.

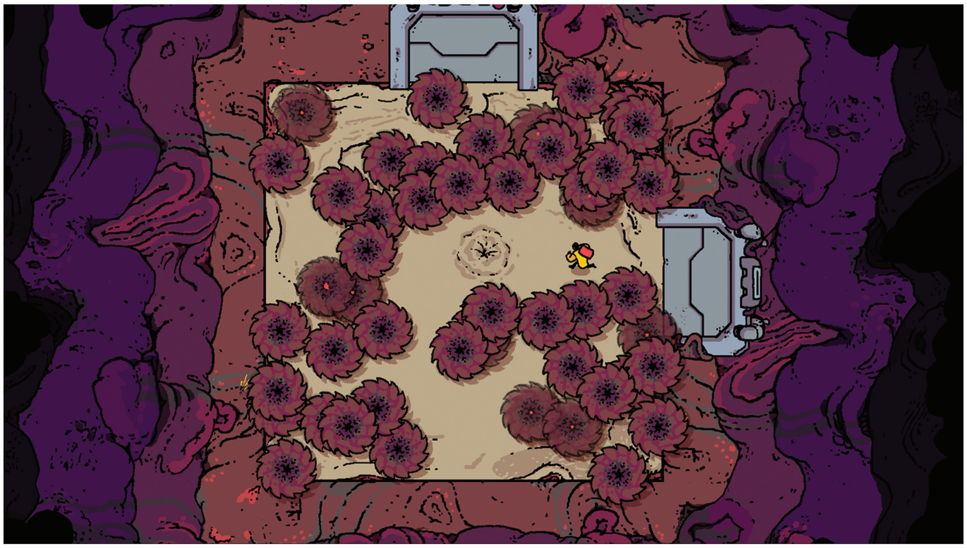
The benchmarks can be anything from get killed by "X" number of different kinds of saws, to defeating four particular kinds of rooms in a row, to surviving inside a certain room for "X" number of seconds. The game's variety of goals, powers and types of enemies do everything to keep it from getting repetitive. Like Minit (another game from half of the team who made Disc Room), the simplicity here makes it effortless to keep playing even when the challenges seem impossible. It's the kind of game where you may plan to zoom through a room or two in 20 minutes . . . then two hours later, you wake up from your disc-crazed haze, 200 deaths in and still ready for more.

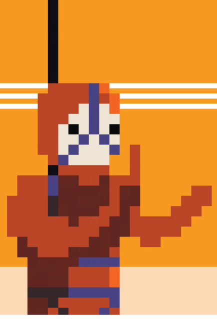
Disc Room is designed to make players feel encouraged and hopeful in the face of constant crisis, and that encouragement carries over into the many, *many* accessibility options embedded in its menus. Grossed out by blood? Turn it into confetti. Getting stressed because the saws are moving too fast, or there are just too dang many of them? Slow them down and/or reduce their number for as long as you want.

Regardless of how you play, the more you get into Disc Room, the better you'll get at it, whether you know it or not. It's the kind of game that builds your reflexes and strategies in ways you aren't even aware of. Like slowly putting on muscles with regular exercise, even the flabbiest saw-bait will end up a blade-dancing ninja in no time.

Disc Room isn't very long, but it's awfully strong. The story mode takes about four to six hours to beat, but with online leaderboards for every room and secrets big and small to discover along the way, there's plenty of reason to jump back in after you've seen how it all turns out in the end. It's a sharp adventure that will really test your mettle!
– JONATHAN

SWITCH PUBLISHER: DEVOLVER DIGITAL DEVELOPERS: KITTY CALIS, JAN WILLEM NIJMAN, TERRI VELLMANN & DOSEONE RATING: T





Seafood Scuffle

FIGHT CRAB

THIS IS A difficult game to review because, and I mean this in the nicest way possible, Fight Crab is without a doubt the stupidest game I've ever played. It also ranks among the hardest I've ever laughed at a video game! But does funny necessarily mean "good?" And in a game like this, does "good" even matter?

Fight Crab is exactly what it says it is: It's a game about crabs fighting each other. It starts out with good old-fashioned claw-on-claw combat, but it isn't long before you're facing down a lobster with a sword in one claw and a revolver in the other, or a pair of menacing shellfish wielding lightsabers and throwing stars. The fact that all of this is rendered in a very realistic art style results in an exercise in absurdity that simply must be played to be understood.

SWITCH PUBLISHER: MASTIFF
DEVELOPER: CALAPPA GAMES
RATING: T

The object of the game is to deal enough damage to your opposing crustacean to knock them onto their back. If they stay knocked over long enough for a count of three, you win. If the same happens to you, you lose, and your crab inexplicably sinks into the ground. No, it doesn't dig itself down in shame — the polygons just literally sink into the ground. It's weird, yet pretty fitting with the overall low budget feel the game seems to be going for.

After you die you're given the option to call for help. This can net you a second crab to join you in battle, or even an airstrike where a plane flies by (piloted by a crab, of course) and drops a bunch of bombs on the battlefield.

As for how it actually plays? That's sort of complicated. The controls are very well thought-out and surprisingly complex. You use the analog sticks to move your left and right claws, the D-Pad to move your legs and the shoulder buttons to either punch or grab things. There's a shocking amount of depth in place here, with tons of crabs and weapons to unlock, a hyper meter for special moves, a photo mode and more, but no matter what you're doing or how hard you try, things always seem to devolve into little more than a bunch of crabs wildly flailing away, hoping to knock one another down.

For all their complexity, the controls don't feel very responsive at all, resulting in pure, often hilarious chaos, and I honestly think that's by design.

If Fight Crab was the kind of game that played tightly and could be taken seriously, then inevitably someone would. The loose, unresponsive nature of the controls all but guarantees that it's physically impossible to take this game seriously.

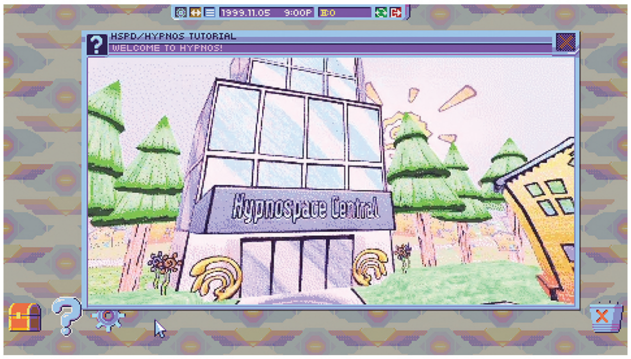
On one hand, er . . . *claw*, if this was a better game, it just wouldn't be as funny. On the other, its innate comedy is the only real crab leg it has to stand on. Once the spectacle wears off, there's still plenty to do, but it's doubtful that you'll actually want to do it.

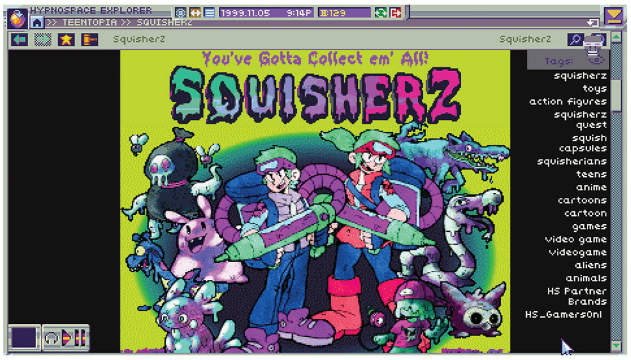
The game's charm cannot be overstated, though. The environments range from a tiny city that makes you all look like giant monsters, to a supermarket seafood counter, to even a serene rocky beach with hilariously calming music (complete with vocals).

Fight Crab is the kind of game you bring out at a party, or when you have a friend over. Play through the single-player campaign beforehand to unlock all the crabs and weapons, then enjoy the genuine hilarity as you show it off to friends and family. You probably won't play it more than a couple of times, but that really depends on how funny you think crab-related combat is.

Fight Crab isn't great, but it is awesome, and that has to count for something. **— KRIS**

6.0





The 'Net of the '90s

HYPNOSPACE OUTLAW

ON APRIL 23, 2009, Yahoo announced that it would be shutting down GeoCities – the heart of the Internet of the '90s, and home to millions of early (often rudimentary) websites. Archivists responded by attempting to save what was left and make it available to modern web users through the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine, or separate initiatives such as the GeoCities Archive. The originals, though, are long gone.

Over a decade later, Nintendo Switch players are now able to experience the magic of what the '90s web was like in Hypnospace Outlaw. The core gameplay focuses on your efforts as an "Enforcer" for the Hypnospace web service, scouring through user webpages in order to find and take down violations ranging from copyright infringement and harassment to malware.

Playing through Hypnospace Outlaw is similar to using your web browser. Many of the elements that make web surfing easier – bookmarks, a built-in search function with tags and text-to-speech – are present in-game with stamps taking the place of bookmarks. Your digital assistant, HYPII (pronounced "hippy"), not only alerts you of new emails and viruses that you encounter, but can also do text-to-speech when you tap a block of text with the Y Button.

The way that you load the game itself is a literal time machine in sound. I was floored when I booted up the game and heard the familiar click of someone turning on a '90s desktop computer, followed by the sounds of a whirring floppy drive!

Visually, the interface does a good job of imitating what a '90s operating system looked like, and the websites retain many elements that defined those crude GeoCities pages, and others from the same decade. There's even an in-game equivalent of MIDIs – tinny musical tracks with a quirky but loveable charm – and to help you browse the Hypnospace, you can even use a keyboard and mouse as your controller!

While the gameplay is more similar to hypertext fiction and interactive novels like 2064: Read Only Memories and Snatcher, there are plenty of webpages to explore and read through. Some of the violations assigned to you take some reading between the lines to figure out where to pinpoint a particular one, while others may prompt you to delve into the rabbit hole of '90s pop culture and computers.

Unlike interactive novels, however, your role in Hypnospace Outlaw's story is more passive, since you merely follow orders – and your only interactions outside of receiving email are job-related or transactional. The only impact that you have (outside of making users irate) is near the end of the game, when you piece together the events that occurred around the turn of the millennium. That doesn't mean that the writing's poor – many, if not all, of the websites are rich in personality – but the experience of playing the game takes center stage.

If you enjoy these sorts of scavenger hunts, have some fond memories of the 1990s or, like me, have a passion for computers and the web, you will enjoy your role as a Hypnospace Enforcer. **– BRYAN**

8.5

SWITCH PUBLISHER: NO MORE ROBOTS
DEVELOPERS: TENDERSHOOT, MICHAEL LASCH & THATWHICHIS MEDIA
RATING: T

The Ultimate Anime Swordsman

SUPER SMASH BROS. ULTIMATE: CHALLENGER PACK 8

WE'RE OVER HALFWAY through with Fighters Pass 2. A total of six new select screen spots will ultimately be added to Ultimate in this second wave of DLC for the latest Super Smash sequel, and here in the third of those six slots we have a new iconic villain being brought in from third-party publisher Square Enix: Sephiroth, the legendary "One-Winged Angel" from Final Fantasy VII. Much to Cloud's dismay!

I always like to make a record of the general fan reaction to each reveal, and hype seemed high for Sephiroth: His signature theme song and incredibly intricate debut trailer made for a truly exciting moment in December. Detractors despaired that the overall Final Fantasy brand is now represented by two characters from the same installment, when FF as a whole has many more worthy candidates to consider. Others lamented that in a game already overflowing with sword-wielding anime-styled warriors, Sephiroth is the most extreme example of that trope being trotted out once again.

Luckily, his sword is at least totally unlike any other we've seen. I'd personally thought Sephiroth was an unviable option just due to how long his blade is – but in a game that previously added the arm-extending Min Min to the cast, his eight-foot blade now seems fine.

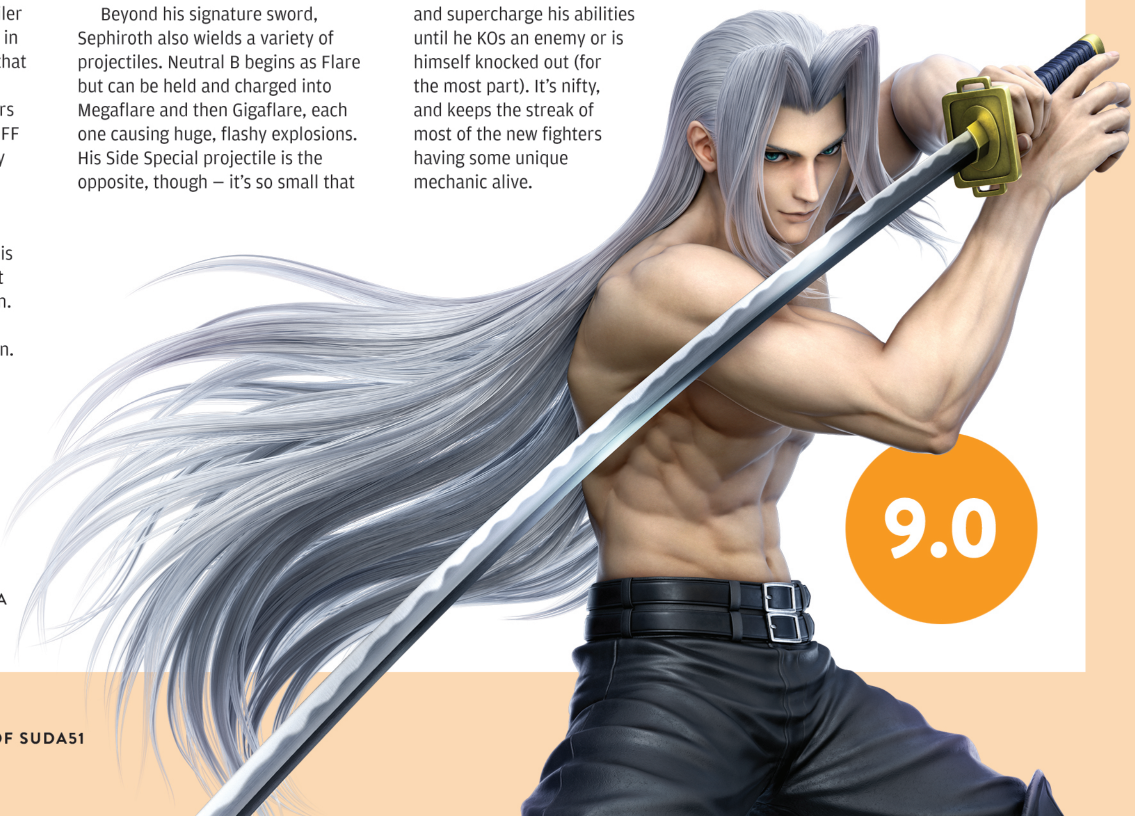
The Masamune gives him incredible reach in several standard and Smash attacks, and it's also uniquely functional in that Sephiroth can stab it straight into vertical surfaces to anchor himself there for a moment, adding to his recovery options. The obscenely lengthy odachi is also the star of his Up Special move, in which Sephiroth launches himself forward with a flurry of slices in the direction you choose with the Control Stick. It's useful for getting back to solid footing if you're sent flying, but is also brutal as an attack on flat surfaces as well.

Beyond his signature sword, Sephiroth also wields a variety of projectiles. Neutral B begins as Flare but can be held and charged into Megaflare and then Gigaflare, each one causing huge, flashy explosions. His Side Special projectile is the opposite, though – it's so small that it can barely be seen. Called Shadow Flare, it's a thin strip of dark energy that causes orbs of pain to begin orbiting your opponent. Up to five orbs can encircle them at a time, and after a few revolutions around their body, they all strike their target together to deal delayed damage.

Lastly, his Down Special is a counterattack. It's a little different in how it works, but we've seen a lot of counters from other characters.

The cherry on top, though, is Sephiroth's Winged Form. If he falls behind in battle, his one dark angel wing will sprout from his back and supercharge his abilities until he KOs an enemy or is himself knocked out (for the most part). It's nifty, and keeps the streak of most of the new fighters having some unique mechanic alive.

Sephiroth, for me, is another great addition to the Smash cast – but what really sends his Challenger Pack 8 over the top is the fact that it also includes a new FFVII-inspired stage (Northern Cave) as well as several new songs. Previously, Cloud was accompanied into the Smash series by only two pieces of music, and that has been a blemish of the sterling reputation of Smash ever since. Perhaps Mr. Sakurai pushed to invite Sephiroth to the dance purely to have a chance to right that wrong! **– LUCAS**



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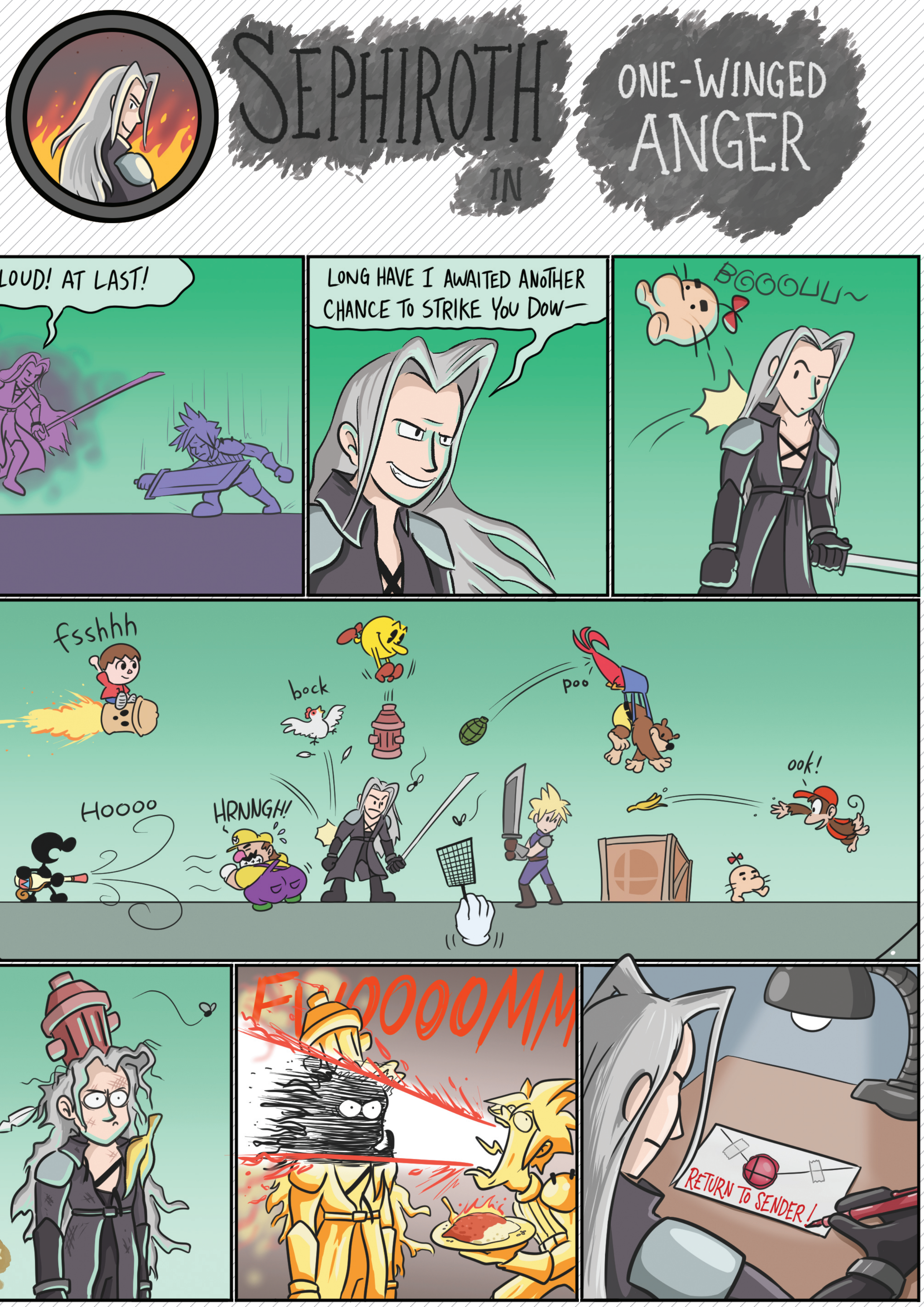
DLC PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPERS: NINTENDO, SORA & BANDAI NAMCO RATING: E10+



BY MATTHEW TARANTO

THE KILLER CAREER OF SUDA51

須田 剛一

BY JONATHAN HOLMES

A HUMAN BREATHING NEW LIFE (AND DEATH) INTO OLD GENRES

BEFORE BECOMING A game developer, Suda51 had many jobs, including work laying out brochures for Sega and even laying out flower arrangements on caskets at a mortuary! His appreciation for beauty, morbidity and video games would eventually land him a job at Human Entertainment, the publisher of the Fire Pro Wrestling series. At the tender age of 24, he directed 1993's Super Fire Pro Wrestling III: Final Bout, a Japan-only title that used unlicensed likenesses of a variety of Eastern and Western wrestlers. Hulk Hogan became "Ax Dugan," The Ultimate Warrior was "Astro Blaster" and Japan's legendary grappler Genichiro Tenryu became "Thunder Ryu," all in a surprisingly effective attempt to protect against copyright infringement lawsuits.

Imagining these names required its own special brand of creativity, and Suda seemed to revel in the ridiculousness of it all. In fact, it's doubtful that anyone could have predicted the next batch of surprises that Suda had in store for the long-running franchise. His next game, Super Fire Pro Wrestling Special, was the first he ever wrote, and it didn't pull any punches. First, he named the lead character Morio Smith, a not-too-subtle reference to Morrissey, the boldly effeminate lead singer for the British rock band The Smiths. Then, even more controversially, he ended the game with Morio's suicide. It was a move that sent shockwaves throughout the Japanese gaming world, and is still infamous to this day, over 27 years later.

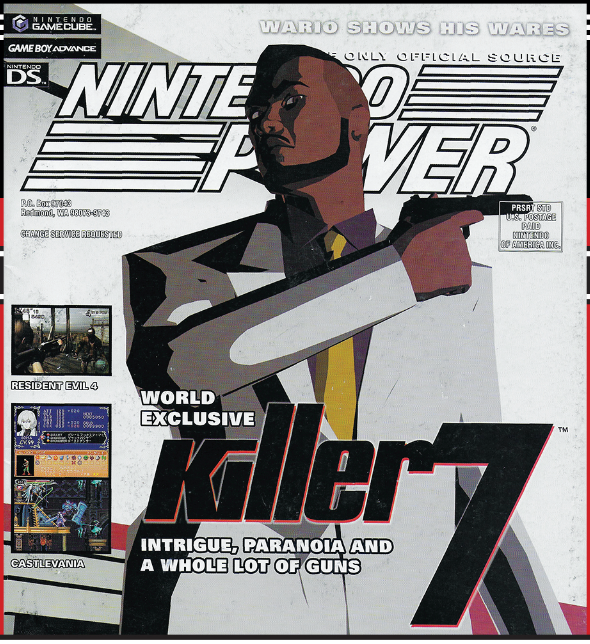
Love it or hate it, anyone could see that Suda's writing was powerful, and so Human put his talents on a genre that might be more fitting to him. In 1996, Suda was put in charge of the Twilight Syndrome games on the PS1: a trilogy of 2D survival horror titles centered on high school girls bedeviled by ghosts and other monsters. Suda, a notorious scaredy cat, worked to inject his own fears into the franchise, eventually shifting the emphasis away from the supernatural and toward stories of real-life terror. Suda's chapters in the Twilight Syndrome mythos never left Japan, but they were nonetheless quite influential, inspiring several spiritual sequels, revivals and even three films. Hideo Kojima, big boss of the Metal Gear series, was also a big fan, and one day he'd tap Suda for wholly an unexpected collaboration . . . but that's a story for another page.

TAKING A BIG LEAP WITH GRASSHOPPER

SUDA LEFT HUMAN in 1998 – and then Human went bankrupt two years later, saddled with approximately 4,000,000,000 yen in debt. A free agent, he opted away from more work-for-hire jobs and instead formed his own studio, Grasshopper Manufacture, named after a 1992 song from the British rock band Ride. Suda looped the song for hours and hours when working at Human, inspiring his mission to take the same focused, rebellious energy in his favorite music and infuse it into his games. The company's original slogan was "Salon Analog Organization." It was their way of declaring their dedication to niche experiences with an organic feel. A few years later, they rethought the catchphrase, rebranding themselves as a "Video Game Band" that set out to prove that "Punk's Not Dead."

Their first release was a hopping mad visual novel called The Silver Case, directed and co-written by Suda, now free of any of the expectations that come with maintaining the feel of a pre-existing game franchise. It starts off as a simple crime investigation before turning toward the dystopian, taking us to a near future where the masses are manipulated in ways that feel painfully close to current events. Its success led to the development of Flower, Sun, and Rain, an open-world adventure about exploring a mysterious tropical island (complete with pink alligators), and it's really something. In the playable tutorial, you stick a headphone jack into a stranger's eye so that you can enter your date of birth directly into his brain! That's just the start of how it parodies weird symbiotic relationships with video games, inevitably culminating in a reveal that gives all-new meaning to the term "extra lives."

Now firmly established, Grasshopper also began working on international releases, first as a support team on the Shining Soul series, and then on an original PS2 title. Michigan: Report from H*** was the first game of Suda's to ever be localized in English, putting you in the role of a cameraman for "Zaka TV," tasked to document a disastrous attack on Chicago by hideous leech monsters. Your camerawork is rated on three categories: "Suspense," "Eroticism" and "Immorality." While it was critically panned, Michigan attracted the eyes of even more powerful forces in the industry, priming Suda for his biggest game yet.

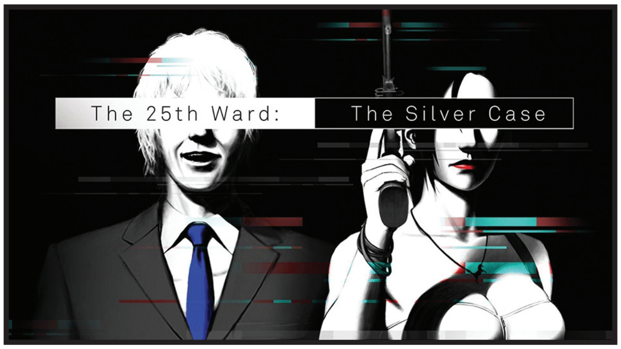


MAKING A KILLING WITH NINTENDO POWER

SEEING SUDA'S ENORMOUS potential, Capcom contracted with the young developer to create Killer7, a surreal, cel-shaded action game about a man in a wheelchair with seven alternate personalities, all with the last name Smith (just like Morio in Super Fire Pro Wrestling Special). Initially a GameCube exclusive, it joined Resident Evil 4, Viewtiful Joe, P.N.03 and Dead Phoenix (an unreleased 3D shooter) as part of the "Capcom Five," an unofficial series of "mature" games from the publisher designed to fill holes in the console's library. In this way, Killer7 was more than just a game – it was a piece of a manifesto from both Capcom and Nintendo, declaring that the GameCube was an exciting, relevant console for "adult gamers."

This push led to a cover story for the April 2005 issue of Nintendo Power. It introduced Suda and his work to the Western world, warning that Killer7 is "not a game for children. Not in any way, shape or form. In fact, it's probably not a game for some adults. It's extremely violent, often profane, and deals with such topics as sex, cults, kidnapping, political assassinations, black market organ sales and full-scale war." Suda was also interviewed in the issue, where he voiced his "firm belief that video games are the most challenging form of artistic media we know" and that he'd love to be a "leader of a new 'movement' of games being viewed as an art form."

Killer7 wasn't a huge hit, but in true Grasshopper form, it gained the respect of critics and publishers worldwide, opening the door for the "Video Game Band" to scale up in all-new ways. Shortly thereafter, Suda would write and direct game adaptations of two popular anime series (Blood+ and Samurai Champloo), as well as The 25th Ward, a direct sequel to The Silver Case (see Page 46 for more on that). He also produced Contact, a Nintendo DS title directed by Akira Ueda (Final Fantasy VI, Super Mario RPG), who he'd previously partnered with on Michigan. Ueda would leave Grasshopper shortly thereafter, making Suda their most experienced director – and then the pressure was definitely on. With his newfound experience designing 3D sword action games and a growing place on the global stage, Suda began work on the title that would define his career . . .



NO MORE OBSCURITY LEADS TO EXPLOSIVE NEW PARTNERSHIPS

THE PLAN WITH Killer7 was to "do what Nintendon't" in order to fill the gap for thoughtful, edgy, adult games on their consoles left by Nintendo's reluctance to create for that audience. The problem was, Killer7 wasn't very approachable, and the console it called home was probably a little too far gone.

With No More Heroes, Suda got a second chance at this "Nintendon't" approach on a Nintendo system that needed it, and he knocked it out of the park! Players who felt left in the cold by Nintendo's largely "casual friendly" titles were thrilled by this bloody action title. It was filled with old-school video game in-jokes (killing enemies makes them explode into coins and dollar bills, just like in River City Ransom and Scott Pilgrim!) and motion-controlled mechanics that never left you feeling frustrated.

It was a hit, and for Suda and company, things would never be the same. Drawing upon his experience with the Twilight Syndrome games, Suda was then hired to help create Fatal Frame IV, a new "teens vs. ghosts" horror title for Nintendo and Koei Tecmo. He'd also team with Hideo Kojima on Sdatcher, a radio drama sequel to the classic visual novel Snatcher, one of the games that inspired Suda to get into the industry.

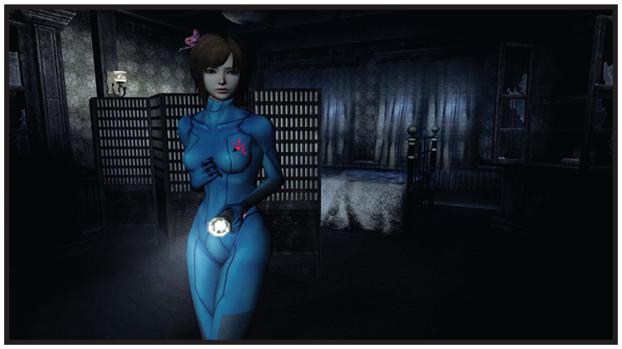
It was an amazing time for Grasshopper, but Suda was so in demand that he no longer seemed to have the time for directing.

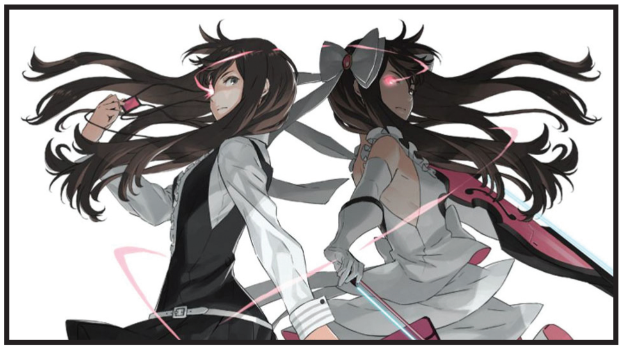
He was a writer and executive on a litany of projects, like Shadows of the *[bleep]* (reuniting him with Resident Evil co-creator Shinji Mikami) and Lollipop Chainsaw (partnering with Guardians of the Galaxy director James Gunn).

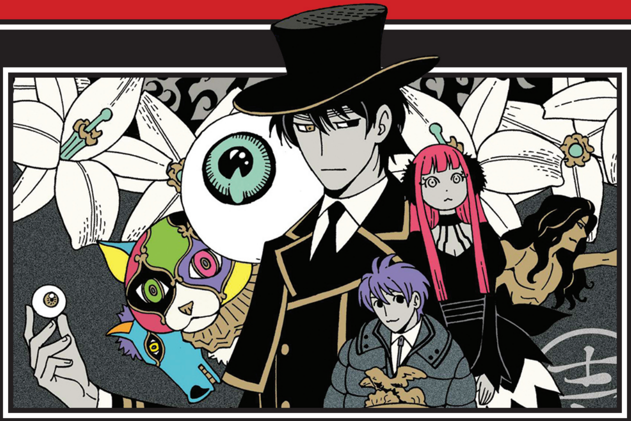
He also helped with a series of No More Heroes ports, sequels and spin-offs, a rhythm game based on Neon Genesis Evangelion and multiple new IPs like Black Knight Sword, Liberation Maiden, Sine Mora, Frog Minutes, Killer is Dead and Diabolical Pitch.

Still not enough? He also brought Flower, Sun, and Rain to the DS while coordinating other titles for Nintendo consoles that never saw the light of day.

It was an era when Suda may have been spread too thin to take on the same risks that he used to – though the winds of change would bring him back to his old ways soon enough . . .







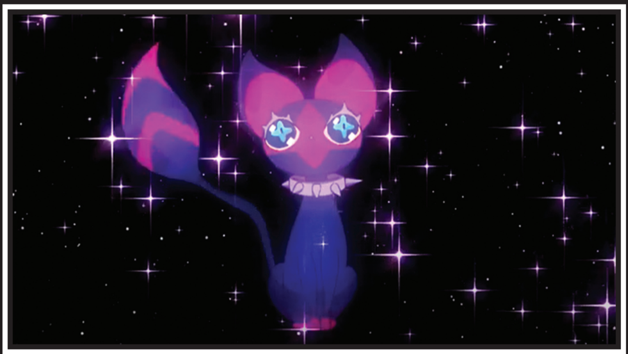
GUNG-HO FOR NEW WORLDS AND OLD FRIENDS

GUNGHO INTERACTIVE, creators of the massively successful Puzzle & Dragons franchise, acquired Grasshopper Manufacture in 2013. Both parties had a lot to gain from the arrangement: GungHo was practically swimming in cash, but had no reputation for artistry; Suda was a famous game developer, renowned for his authenticity and creative spirit, but his games rarely sold in the millions. With art and commerce brought together under one roof, the sky was the limit.

Still, Suda seemed somewhat hesitant to return to the director's chair. He wrote a new game called Short Peace: Ranko Tsukigime's Longest Day (directed by Tokyo Jungle's Yohei Kataoka), a comic called Kurayami Dance that pulled from the story he originally intended for Shadows of the *[bleep]* (including plenty of cameos from the rest of the Suda-verse), a visual novel sequel to Liberation Maiden and a short animated film called Tokio of the Moon's Shadow, featuring his favorite pet (a cat named Jam) as a fantastic purple space dragon.

With plenty of business and artistic support at GungHo and Grasshopper, it looked as though writing may become his full-time gig. He next helped produce Let It Die, a free-to-play Souls-like, but his role there was more along the lines of a mentor, injecting some of his signature charm into what was otherwise a straightforward free-to-play action RPG.

Then in 2018, Suda's branch of Grasshopper stretched off from GungHo central, positioning both Suda and Travis for a comeback. For the first time since Fatal Frame IV, he was directing a new game: a No More Heroes spin-off called Travis Strikes Again. Like with the Fire Pro Wrestling games, it featured a huge ensemble cast, with some names changed to avoid lawsuit. The difference was, instead of Hulk Hogan and Ravishing Rick Rude receiving pseudonyms (or should we say, Suda-nymes), it was other real-world game devs, and maybe even Suda himself, who had been renamed. Heavily inspired by his love of indies, Travis Strikes Again was Suda's most autobiographical work to date, tying together nearly every game he'd ever written. Still, it didn't play like other entries in the series, leaving fans to wonder if it was Travis' last hurrah. Then, thanks to a post-credits scene, their fears were put to rest . . .



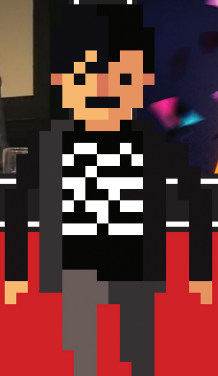
THE RETURN OF THE PUNK ROCK JEDI

NO MORE HEROES III was promised at the very end of Travis Strikes Again, then formally announced a few months after that game debuted in 2019 — and the fandom went completely bananas. They'd waited over a decade for this, and it was just the start of the too-good-to-be-true Suda news that would drop in the coming year. Suda also revealed his return to the Fire Pro series with a special DLC scenario for Fire Pro Wrestling World. Called "The Vanishing," it stars the son of Morio Smith, the tragic lead of Super Fire Pro Wrestling Special, with a story that both explains Morio's legacy and is an upbeat tale about a young tag team finding their own path in the modern world.

Suda, intoxicated, also got together with his drinking buddy Hidetaka "Swery65" Suehiro, creator of Deadly Premonition, to announce that they too were working on a new project. The two wildmen were on a live stream when they broke the news, beers in hand, dubbing their project "Hotel Barcelona." Their hope is to make it a small sidescrolling horror game, published by Devolver Digital, a studio known for bite-sized gore-fests like Carrion, Hotline Miami and Disc Room.

It was all a sign that Suda's going back to the earliest days of his career, with a renewed underdog attitude. Just the fact that he was willing to answer 51 questions for our humble publication, including exclusive hints about his plans for projects happening after No More Heroes III, shows how he'll always be an everyman at heart. Even after becoming one of the most famous game developers in the world, he's still as human as ever.

Looking back, it's clear that Suda's unflinching dedication to taking creative risks has been the key to his success. His mind generates dreamlike storylines even when he's awake, and instead of running in shame from his own eccentricities, he's dedicated his life to sharing them with the world. Businessmen, obsessed with making more money from games than they'll ever need, can't relate to Suda's sincerity, but they know he has something they don't. And so, they put their faith (and funding) behind his projects again and again, even when they run counter to "normal." Creating heartfelt oddities and working against the odds to get them done — that's Suda51's legacy.



REST O

the sitcom starring a final boss and an obnoxious '90s video game mascot

by LLK

BY LINDSEY LAYNE KING

NO MORE HEROES III

When aliens touch down on Earth, only Travis can tackle them!

IN THE SUMMER of 2011, Suda51 told me about his budding plans for No More Heroes III. We were at E3 (the world's former premier video game trade show), and wouldn't you know it, we'd just laid our hands on the Wii U for the very first time. It sounds bananas in retrospect, but on that day, we were both brimming with confidence about Nintendo's new system. His optimism led Suda's brain to burst with ideas for the Wii U Game Pad — all concepts poised to make No More Heroes III a truly unique experience. This forward leap in tech would be expressed symbolically by Travis Touchdown passing the torch to Scarlet "Shinobu" Jacobs, the katana-wielding school girl with a robotic arm. Suda thought graduating Travis' enemy-turned-student to the role of lead character made logical sense.

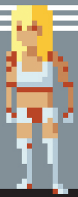
SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: GRASSHOPPER MANUFACTURE
RELEASE: AUGUST 27, 2021 RATING: M

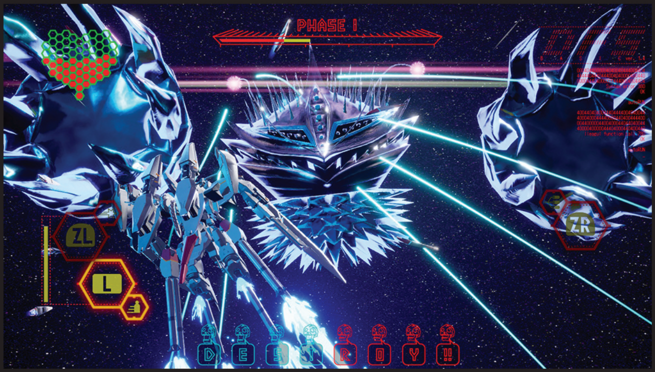
She'd also be the first woman to star in an original action game from Grasshopper Manufacture, keeping with the studio's mission to never rely on predictable comforts.

Of course, that didn't work out. Over the next two years, news on No More Heroes III went dark, while Suda released not one, not two, but three new games (Lollipop Chainsaw, Short Peace: Ranko Tsukigime's Longest Day and Liberation Maiden) starring teenage starlets; all high schoolers who could have easily passed for Shinobu's classmates. Fans guessed that Suda's designs for NMH3 had been absorbed into these other teen girl action games, leaving the franchise on ice in their wake. In 2015, Suda even said "maybe we'll see [No More Heroes III] in 15 or 25 years." Then he laughed, as his fans nodded silently, preparing their wait for 2030.

Thankfully, this painfully long-range game plan for No More Heroes III is also "no more," proving once again that with Suda, it's best to expect the unexpected. The game is now set for release on August 27, 2021 (one year late, or nine years early, depending on your calendar), and it's actually going to end up being the fourth entry in the series, working as a direct sequel to 2019's Travis Strikes Again. Instead of centering on Shinobu, we'll be picking things up with Travis in real time as he enters middle age. No longer the wildly hormonal goofball we'd grown to love in prior games, **[WARNING! SPOILERS FOR TRAVIS STRIKES AGAIN APPROACHING]** he's now a lonely hermit who's cut himself off from civilization in order to keep his wife Sylvia and two children (Hunter and Jeane) safe from harm **[END SPOILERS]**. It seemed as though nothing could pull him back to Santa Destroy and the action-packed life he'd once led, but in No More Heroes III, an alien invasion drags him back to reality. In an instant, he goes from a bearded, sad-faced slacker playing indie games alone in a motel to an armored superhero, flying into battle against an armada of looming UFOs.

Travis' new big bad is a blue-skinned intergalactic emperor called "FU," a name that couldn't be more on-brand for No More Heroes. A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away, he was harmless-looking fluffball who took a trip to Earth and befriended a boy named Damon Riccitiello; 20 years later, Damon has become a powerful CEO and FU is a muscular supervillain. It only makes sense that the two would reunite for a little world domination, right? Not knowing any of this, Travis decides to take on FU headfirst, and it doesn't look like he's alone. He's got Badman (his co-op partner from Travis Strikes Again) by his side . . . at least for a few seconds. FU takes him out with lightning speed, and he may not have survived!





Shinobu's back too, which is only fair, seeing as she was originally supposed to star in this game – though that may be just the beginning. Suda has hinted that he wants No More Heroes III to be an Avengers-scale team-up event, clueing us to expect even more playable protagonists this time around.

In our interview (see Page 58), he told us that getting the rights to the characters he created for other publishers can be next to impossible. But in reality, he's done it before! Travis Strikes Again featured characters from Killer7, Shadows of the *[bleep]* and many others from his back catalog of projects. In fact, there's a point in the game where Travis, riding atop Link's horse Epona (!), enters Castle Dracula (!!), where he sees cyborg assassin Mondo Zappa (the star of Killer is Dead) behead the famous vampire (!!!) before giving Travis a new video game, pulled directly out of the Count's brain (!!!!). Yes, dear reader, I wasn't kidding when I told you that with Suda, we should always expect the unexpected.

So now that they're confirmed to exist in the same "Suda-verse," it's possible that No More Heroes III will feature Mondo, Garcia Hotspur, and who knows who else! We're also expecting a boatload of Travis' old opponents to make a comeback. Henry, Badgirl, Kimmy Howell (the girl with the double-ended lightsaber flute) and Destroyman (the evil mailman turned superhero) are already confirmed. We've also gotten a glimpse of someone who could be Midori Midorikawa, a key character from The Silver Case comic "Red, Blue and Green." While it's hard to say how far this crossover will go, it's clear that the game is aiming to offer Suda fans a sweet and spicy mix of old and new.

That goes double for the gameplay. The traditional action of No More Heroes 1 and 2 is back in full swing, and the previously explorable open world of Santa Destroy appears to be on the map as well. To roam the streets in style, Travis has some new wheels: a bright red, Akira-inspired motorbike. And to better grip the handlebars, he's brought his Death Glove from Travis Strikes Again. Now decked out with a pair of Switch Joy-Cons embedded in the knuckles, the glove uses interchangeable chips to give Travis advanced abilities like a Force Choke, homing laser blasts and the power to slow enemies down while he carves them up.

Speaking of carving, Travis is still swinging with two of his best beam katanas, the Tsubaki MK-II and the Peony, as well as an all-new suit of Iron Man-esque armor, a perfect fit for decimating enemies on the ground or in space.

Yes, outer space! What, you thought Travis would just play defense down on the dirt? If aliens are attacking from orbit, you'd better believe he's going to take the fight straight to them.

Odd jobs around town also return, and you'll need the money if you want to take on new bosses. Now that Santa Destroy may have been, uh, destroyed, Damon Riccitiello appears to be the one in charge of the city's economy, as the new in-game currency is named after his corporation. Under his rule, cash is tight, and your employment options aren't so great. Mowing lawns and trash collecting are back, and there is also work in some kind of purple rock mineshaft, and maybe a new kind of multi-man musical chairs event? And a first-person horror setpiece? And a classic RPG turn-based battle? And a giant red-leafed tree with a human face growing in what might be Travis' new home base? Could that be some kind of Deadly Premonition crossover? Or a Zelda crossover?! *Or both?!?!* It wouldn't be the first time for either, folks!

All uncertainty aside, Travis is still a down-to-Earth everyman at heart, happy to suplex aliens like they were common punks in a street brawl. But for better or worse, his life as a bachelor scrub is over. He's no longer the cel-shaded cartoon character he was in 2007. He's now a weathered, tangible man, hiding his vulnerabilities under a thick coat of bravado and technology.

Suda has said that Rocky III was a big inspiration for this story, and that makes sense, seeing that Travis is no longer motivated by pure ambition alone. Action heroes of a certain age often learn to fight for things bigger than themselves, on battlefields scaled to match their newfound powers and responsibilities. For Tony Stark, that meant becoming a martyr. For Rocky, it was being a mentor. For Travis, life could lead to all of the above. But again, this is Suda51 we're talking about. All we can expect for sure is the unexpected.

– JONATHAN

THE SILVER 2425

Grasshopper Manufacture's original investigations, reopened.

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: GRASSHOPPER MANUFACTURE
RELEASE: TBA RATING: RP

"KILL THE PAST." It's an expression that means a lot in the Suda51 universe, and that all started with The Silver Case, the very first game by Grasshopper Manufacture. Originally a PS1 exclusive, it's finally headed to a Nintendo console in the form of The Silver 2425 for the Switch, a two-for-one collection that also includes its sequel, The 25th Ward.

If you played Travis Strikes Again or Flower, Sun, and Rain, many of the faces in The Silver Case(s) will look familiar to you, but their gameplay is unlike anything else out there. This series uses a unique, "the style is the substance" user interface called "Film Window," which is in itself a metaphor for some of the underlying themes in these two games. Its blending of motion comic cutscenes and more traditional game mechanics leaves you constantly guessing who's actually in control.

Though it contains a few characters and concepts from Moonlight Syndrome (the last titles Suda released with Human Entertainment before founding Grasshopper), The Silver Case is a wholly original story. Centering around the exploits of Tokyo's Heinous Crimes Unit, it mixes light puzzle solving, crime scene investigation and even surprise clips of full-motion video to build a multi-layered world that's easy to lose your thoughts in. There are so many details to dig into, with multiple chatty NPCs who feel unreal, yet still a lot like someone you might know in real life.

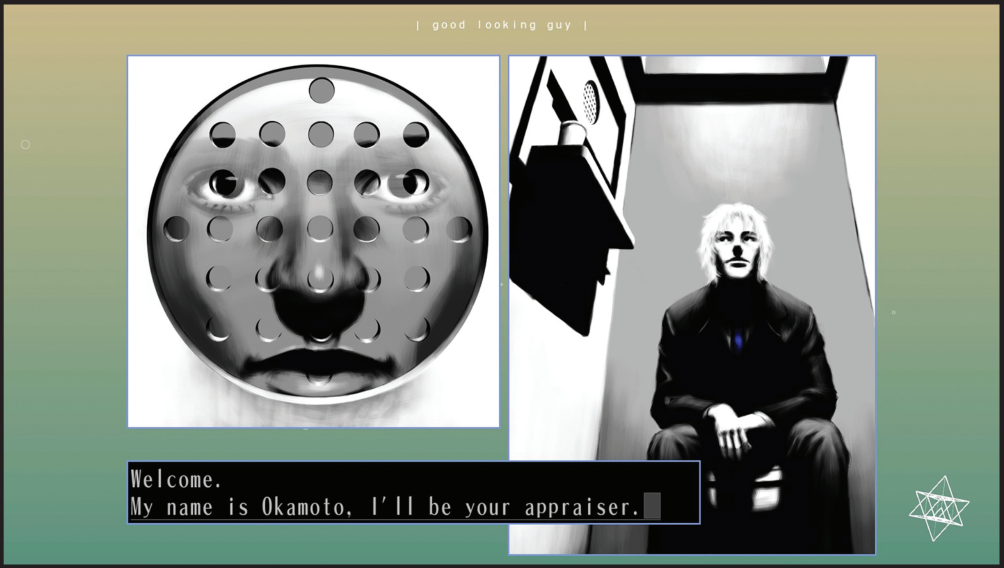
You inhabit two different leads throughout the game, but the real main character is undoubtedly Kamui Uehara, Tokyo's "King of Crime." An infamous serial killer thought to have been locked away long ago, Kamui becomes the prime suspect in a new rash of killings in Tokyo's 24th Ward. Working to solve these murders opens up a Rashomon-like study in how our perception shapes our reality, turning heroes into villains and back again, depending on how your perspective has shifted. The Silver Case is a great explainer of that phenomena, though it ultimately ends with more questions than answers.

Some of those answers come later, in The 25th Ward, an even more daring and expressive plot that takes place six years after The Silver Case. Now spread across three stories and multiple leads (including one who may be the son of Kamui himself), the sequel takes the themes of its predecessor and grinds them through various systems (psychological, political and recreational) to shape people's lives in ways they can't fully see.

Do we have free will, or are we slaves to our brains' pre-programmed responses to stimuli? What's the difference between a virtual reality and an organic one? Does the past dictate our future, and if so, can we kill it, and then take control of our own fate?

These are just a few of the questions that The 25th Ward brings to light, delivered through narrative exposition, an underground toilet dungeon, a turn-based battle or two and, of course, talking turtles.

In Japan, the first print run of The Silver 2425 will include The Silver Case: Red, Blue and Green, a limited edition manga that's a soft sequel to The 25th Ward. We don't know if this early adopters' gift will be included in the promised Western release, but if you don't want to wait, fans actually translated the comics into English and turned it into a game for PC! You can find it at **Believeinthe.net**. It's a great way to ready yourself for The Silver 2425 on Switch, which Suda says he "definitely wants to release overseas."
– JONATHAN



BALAN WONDERWORLD

Yuji Naka is just about ready to swing open the gates to his all-new world of wonder.

THE TIME FOR wonder is nearly upon us, as Balan Company and Square Enix's Balan Wonderworld is slated for a release in late March. In advance of this, a demo was released across all platforms . . . and opinions have been mixed, at best.

While the visual style of Sonic the Hedgehog designer Naoto Oshima is on full display, those looking for a 3D experience akin to what Sega's Blue Blur offers might come away more than a little disappointed. In Balan's world of wonder, frenetic action takes a backseat to a more leisurely round of puzzle-platforming, not unlike what you would expect to see in many a 3D Mario title. Though in truth, even those tend to feel more action-packed than what the demo brought forth, as enemies were something of a rarity, tending to only show up in certain areas of each stage. They'll respawn, certainly, but for the most part, you're left to explore the rest of the stage in relative peace.

One element that will feel familiar to Sonic fans is how levels are plotted out. Each stage contains two chapters, then concludes with a boss battle in its own third area. Fortunately, the many costumes you can acquire will carry over from one chapter and level to the next, with multiple opportunities to change up the wardrobe you have on hand. You'll need those opportunities, too, as sometimes you'll need to backtrack to previous levels or change things up in order to obtain certain Balan statues, which — similar to Mario's Shines, Stars, Moons, Clovers, Horseshoes, Balloons, etc. — are needed in sufficient quantity to open up new levels.

Controls are as simple as simple can be: Every button jumps and/or performs a costume's special action. Well, every button but the shoulder bumpers, which rotate through the costumes you have on hand, Mega Man-style, albeit with an animation that takes a touch too long each time.

It's a modest gameplay loop that has its charms, and I found that the more I played, the more it grew on me. What didn't grow on me, however, were the performance issues.

I played the demo on two platforms, Xbox One and Nintendo Switch (natch), to compare how it ran between them, given the gulf in their respective power.

On Xbox One, I experienced significant load times, and worse, the game would occasionally freeze on me while the music kept playing. It never froze to the point where I had to reset or anything, but just long enough to interrupt the game before it resumed, as if nothing had happened. It was semi-frequent, enough that I quit counting after the seventh time.

On the Nintendo Switch, however, things were a different story. I think the game loaded a bit faster, and it never froze on me — though at one point half the screen did just go pitch black for a moment, as though someone had managed to turn off half my TV. That aside, this came at a price: Visuals had a lot of aliasing going on, and the framerate was lower. I'm not even someone who can normally tell whether something is running at 30 or 60fps at a glance, but I certainly noticed it here. That said, the actual playing experience felt better through consistency, if nothing else.

We've got mere weeks left until Balan Wonderworld is supposed to launch, and the greatest wonder of all is if it will be ready in time. **— DAVID**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: SQUARE ENIX DEVELOPERS: BALAN COMPANY & ARZEST RELEASE: MARCH 26, 2021 RATING: E10+

MONSTER HUNTER RISE

Hands-on impressions of the series' all-new Switch exclusive!

UP UNTIL NOW, Switch owners looking to get their monster hunting fix have had to settle for Monster Hunter Generations Ultimate – a good, if somewhat dated, port of the series' final 3DS installment. That, however, will change this March with the release of Monster Hunter Rise. Unlike Generations Ultimate, Rise is an entirely new Monster Hunter game designed specifically for the Switch, and it builds upon all the strides the series has made in recent years while introducing its own share of new ideas and mechanics.

Capcom gave us a brief taste of these in the recent Monster Hunter Rise demo, a limited-time sampling of the game that was only available until February 1. Although the demo has since been removed from the eShop, it did a great job of showcasing Rise's signature new features, the Palamute and the Wirebug – both of which radically shake up the traditional Monster Hunter gameplay.

The Palamute makes the most immediate impact. Like the Palico, this canine companion accompanies you on a quest, lending some offensive assistance as you battle monsters. Where the Palamute really shines, however, is when it comes to traversal. You can hop on your Palamute any time during a mission and travel around the environment much more quickly than before – all without depleting any stamina. On top of that, the Palamute can sprint vertically up certain walls, letting you reach elevated areas in a fraction of the time it used to take.

The Wirebug similarly makes traversal much speedier. You begin each mission with two Wirebugs at your disposal and can use the critters to swing, Spider-Man style, around the environment. The Wirebugs aren't unlimited; each one has a brief cooldown period after use, so you can't swing around infinitely. Even with this restriction, however, the Wirebugs greatly expand your range of movement and add a new dynamic to the game.

This is especially true when it comes to battling monsters. If you use a Wirebug while your weapon is drawn, you'll unleash a special move called a Silkbind attack. Each of Rise's 14 different weapon types has its own unique Silkbind attack, adding another dimension to battles. You can also use the Wirebugs to close in on a monster or make a quick retreat from it, which is especially handy when you're wielding a traditionally cumbersome weapon like the Great Sword.

On top of that, connecting with enough Silkbind attacks will eventually ensnare a monster, allowing you to take advantage of the new Wyvern Riding mechanic. After mounting a monster, you temporarily gain control of it, opening up some more options. You can use your monster steed to either attack another beast or launch it into a wall, dealing lots of damage and stunning it.

The game also inherits several quality-of-life improvements Capcom introduced in Monster Hunter World, such as eliminating loading screens and allowing you to consume certain items like potions and rations while moving. Together, these elements make Monster Hunter Rise an exciting new addition to the series, and we can't wait to play more! Fortunately, we won't have to wait too long: Rise launches on March 26! **– KEVIN K.**

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: CAPCOM
RELEASE: MARCH 26, 2021 RATING: T

CRASH BANDICOOT 4: IT'S ABOUT TIME

Rewriting franchise history, now on the Switch!

WOAH! WHEN CRASH 4 was initially unveiled last year, fans were surprised to see that the bandicoot's first fresh outing in over a decade looked like it might be skipping the Switch – a bit of a shocker after the massive success of both the remastered Crash and Spyro collections. Now with the recent announcement that the game will be making the leap to additional consoles, including a shiny new Switch port, there's only one thing left to say: It's about time!

Crash Bandicoot 4 sees our hero and his brainy sister Coco hopping through dimensions when their long-time nemeses Dr. Neo Cortex and N. Tropy escape from the tear in time and space following the events of Crash Bandicoot: Warped. To take down their interdimensional foes, Crash and Coco are going to have to team up with old enemies, new mystic masks and even forgotten friends like Tawna – except this time, she has more in common with a punk-rock Sarah Connor than her original late '90s pin-up inspirations.

The game takes a decidedly back-to-basics approach for the series, with most stages featuring the classic free-running gameplay of the original trilogy. Stay alert for mind-twisting surprises along the way, with masks granting Crash new abilities including reversing gravity and even slowing down time. One personal highlight was an entirely rhythmic stage set against a Mardi Gras-inspired parade that's so inventive, it could be the basis for an entire game!

Multiple playable characters, hidden stages and the new N. Verted modes for every stage ensure that there's still plenty for Crash fanatics to do even after the credits roll. These N. Verted stages put a fresh new *spin* (get it?) on traditional mirror modes, but with even zanier modifiers including psychedelic color filters, backward stages and modified gravity.

Hold on to your Wumpa Fruits, because these stages will put all your platforming skills to the test, as they're some of the hardest in the series' history! Marsupial veterans may already be used to the difficulties that collecting every gem and relic in previous games provided, and Crash 4 fully intends to ramp up that challenge – consider yourself warned!

I played through the original PS4 version of Crash 4 when it released last year and had an absolute blast during my time with it. The Saturday morning cartoon-inspired visuals and writing had me absolutely hooked from the start, and many of the more difficult stages kept me up way later at night than I'd care to admit. Plus, the opportunity to replay the game in Handheld Mode feels like the perfect way to chisel away at the more difficult levels between tasks during the day from just about anywhere.

Aside from the ability to play this version of the game on the go, there haven't been any new features or additions announced for the Switch port thus far. The opportunity's always there to add new unlockable costumes for Crash and Coco, plus Activision and Toys for Bob have already teased that there are more surprises in store to celebrate the series' 25th anniversary.

Even if we don't end up seeing any new additions, Crash 4 is still a game that's absolutely packed to the gills with content. With satisfying challenges, gorgeous visuals and a multiverse of alternate modes, Crash Bandicoot 4: It's About Time is a true return to form and worth keeping an eye on if you missed it the first *time* around! **– JOHN-CHARLES**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: ACTIVISION
DEVELOPER: TOYS FOR BOB
RELEASE: MARCH 12, 2021 RATING: E10+

NEW POKÉMON SNAP

Your photo safari vacation has been booked for April 30!

IT'S ALL COMING into focus now.

The existence of New Pokémon Snap was first revealed last June, and its unveiling blessed old fans of the original N64 game with the long-awaited answer to a heartfelt prayer: Finally, Snap 2 is happening! And now the reality is setting in more than before, as we're fast approaching the game's actual launch at the end of April.

Nintendo, The Pokémon Company and the developers at Bandai Namco have recently revealed more details to keep the hype train fueled on its way to that launch day destination, so let's take another look now!

New Pokémon Snap has been confirmed to be taking place in another all-new and previously unexplored part of the Pokémon planet: the Lental region. "Lental" is a word that means "of or pertaining to a lens," like a camera lens. Not to be confused with "lentil," the kind of plant used to make lentil soup. Though both cameras and plants play a part in the plot here!

Some vegetation in the Lental region has been seen glowing mysteriously – it's a rare event that has been named "the Illumina phenomenon." You play as a young photographer who has been called to this region in order to document this strange occurrence with your camera, in order to help the local researchers figure out why Illumina is happening in the first place.

. . . But the odd, otherworldly glow isn't just affecting the local plant life; it's causing some Pokémon to light up too! So that's the real mission here: going out on a series of photo safaris to take pictures of Pokémon in their natural habitats, while staying on the lookout for those rare few who will appear to be beaming with the light of Illumina.

In the original Pokémon Snap, the series' first-ever professor, Professor Oak, stepped away from his lab in the Kanto region in order to send players out on their photo safaris and judge the merits of their snapshots after each one was done. This time around, Oak's staying rooted in place at home. Now the researcher taking charge of the Illumina investigation and dispatching you on missions is the new Professor Mirror. He seems like he'll functionally be the same as Oak was, decades ago – primarily assigning scores to your photos. But whoever the new voice actor is will have big shoes to fill, as the N64 game was able to get Stuart Zagnit to reprise his role as Oak from the Pokémon anime! (I can still hear him telling me one of my photos is "Wonderful!" in my mind.)

Photos are judged based on the pose of the Pokémon being pictured, how large they appear in the frame, whether or not their entire body is visible and whether or not they're facing you or have their back turned. Perfect pictures will be zoomed in close, capturing an instance of unique, dynamic action!

It'll take practice to perfect your Snapping technique, but Professor Mirror's assistant Rita will be on hand to help you evolve into a true photo pro. That's a break from tradition: The original game didn't have helpers!

There's still more to see in New Pokémon Snap, so make sure you keep the pathway to your mailbox illuminated well – we'll be going into much more detail in the next all-new issue of NF! **– LUCAS**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: BANDAI NAMCO
RELEASE: APRIL 30, 2021 RATING: RP

SUDA'S DEBUT

SUPER FIRE PRO WRESTLING III: FINAL BOUT
SUPER FAMICOM, 1993

Fire Pro is prolific. It doesn't seem so in the States, since only a handful of its entries have been localized for release in our region over the years – but in Japan? It's ubiquitous. Since the release of its first installment over 30 years ago, it's had over 30 different sequels and spin-offs! Averaging out to being an annual event ever since the '80s is a frantic pace for any franchise to maintain, so it makes sense why the brand's developers at Human Entertainment would tap some young talent to help keep up the momentum. So it was that Suda51's first shot at game development came with the Fire Pro series – specifically this seventh installment, the third made for the Super Famicom. This game has gone down in history as being so infamously difficult that Suda and his team had to quickly revise it and release a new "Easy Type" version barely a month after its first edition went on sale! (No downloadable patches in those days). **– LUCAS**

RETROSPECTIVE KILLER7

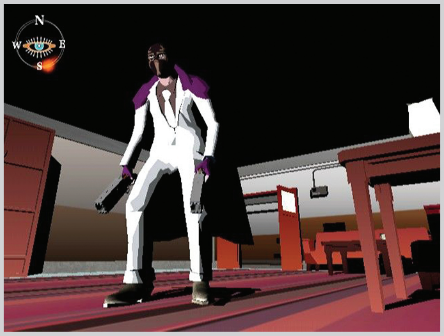
Suda51 left his mark on the Cube era with this ensemble of assassins.

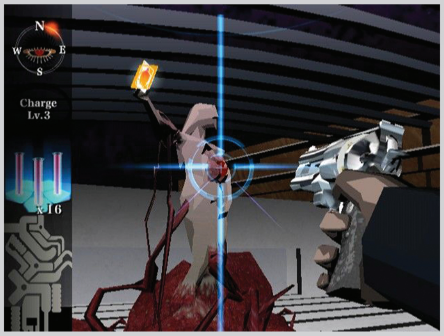
"DECADES FROM NOW, when critics like us and players like you sit around the table and talk about our hobby, we are going to do so with a new frame of reference: before Killer7 and after Killer7." That's from the April 2005 issue of Nintendo Power, and here we are, nearly two decades later, doing almost exactly that.

Killer7 isn't typically discussed quite as reverently as NP had predicted, but they weren't entirely off base. The game was a seminal work, and a signifier of the changes that the industry as a whole – and Nintendo in particular – were about to go through with experimental platforms like the DS and Wii.

Like many games on those platforms – and even more in the modern, explosive indie scene – Killer7's development took a fundamentally different approach than the majority of what came before it. Its focus was on being an experience rather than a traditional "game." The point was to elicit a response from the player more than to merely entertain. The unsettling imagery and subject matter were made specifically to unnerve, and it succeeded in doing so with an abundance of style.

The story revolves around a group of assassins with unique skills – all of whom are actually different alternate personalities of one old man, somehow given form.





They all share the surname Smith: Garcian Smith is the group's healer, Dan Smith can fire a special "Collateral Shot," Kaede Smith is a bloodstained sniper, Kevin Smith is a silent knife expert, Coyote Smith can pick locks, Con Smith focuses on speed and MASK de Smith is a grenade-launching luchador! They were hired by the government to take on a terrorist cult called "Heaven's Smile," and things only get stranger from there.

For all the complexity of the plot, the gameplay is incredibly simple. You guide your character on a set of predetermined paths by pressing a button in lieu of moving an analog stick. You can't see enemies while in motion – but you can hear their demented laughter. When you do, you have to switch to a stationary first-person mode where they become visible, and then you have to kill them before they get close enough to you to detonate themselves.

Killer7 is more than the sum of its parts though, and the simplicity of the gameplay and insanity of its story blend together with striking cel-shaded visuals, disquieting character designs and a heavy reliance on sound to create an experience like almost nothing before it.

The trouble with all of this is, that kind of experience was always going to be a niche one. The gameplay itself is only really fun if you're also swept into the disturbing world in which it takes place. That was a hard sell to your average gamer, but for those open to that kind of experience, Killer7 was a whole new level of immersive.

In the end, historians don't often refer to the world in terms of "before and after Killer7" as Nintendo Power predicted, but its influence on the future of gaming is undeniable. Yes, its audio and visuals are deeply disturbing, its gameplay is obtuse and its pace is frequently bogged down by massive amounts of text, but that's all part of its unique personality. Killer7 is the very definition of "high risk, high reward" game design, and while it didn't set the sales charts on fire the way Capcom probably hoped it would, it did earn historical significance, and cemented Suda51 as a name that Nintendo fans will never ignore. **– KRIS**

ORIGINAL RELEASE: GAMECUBE & PS2, JULY 7, 2005
PUBLISHER: CAPCOM
DEVELOPER: GRASSHOPPER MANUFACTURE

PLAYING IT TODAY

The good news is, tracking down Killer7 in its original form isn't terribly difficult or expensive, if you have the hardware to play it on. The original GameCube version is a bit more costly than its PlayStation 2 counterpart, but as of the time of this writing it isn't exactly a bank breaker, with copies going for $30 to $50 depending on condition, and the PS2 iteration often selling for under $20. If you're looking for something a bit more modern, though, NIS America published a revamped Killer7 port on Steam in 2018, complete with HD textures and widescreen support!

KILLER COMICS

If there's a medium as well-suited to tell the story of Killer7 as video games, it's comics. A year after the game's release, Devil's Due Publishing saw its potential and greenlit Killer7 as a limited series. The art direction went through a dramatic change from the stark anime-inspired look of the game to a more traditional American comic book design, and the story was restructured to fit the narrative style of the medium, but the end result was still undeniably Killer7. Unfortunately, it never caught on, and it was quietly cancelled after only four of 12 planned issues.

LOST IN UNTRANSLATION
FATAL FRAME IV: MASK OF THE LUNAR ECLIPSE

Suda51 made it, and Nintendo published it . . . but only in Japan.

I'M AFRAID OF Fatal Frame.

All horror games, really. And horror films. Any art that exists with the intent of creeping its audience out. And I'm not alone – supposedly Suda51 is similarly scare-averse.

So why did he agree to direct this game?

In the middle of 2008, Nintendo could do no wrong – the Wii had been an insane sale success story for going on two years straight, and loyal Big N fans eagerly awaited each new first-party release that appeared.

Also in the middle of 2008, Suda51 was on a hot streak. He'd just made a major splash with the launch of Killer7 in 2005, then he'd blown everyone away with the first No More Heroes game in 2007.

Together, the combination of Nintendo and Suda51 would have made a major impact at that point in game industry history. Both sides must have agreed, because such a partnership was formed – Suda was brought on to co-direct the fourth installment of the Fatal Frame franchise, pushing past his scaredy-cat nature surely because when Nintendo comes calling with an offer to take on a first-party project, you just don't say no.

And what was Fatal Frame? A previously PlayStation-exclusive horror brand that Nintendo had acquired the publishing rights to from Tecmo, ostensibly to bolster the adult appeal of the Wii library, which was filled with family-friendly hits, but seriously lacking in content on the "M for Mature" side of the spectrum.

Seriously, all the pieces were in place . . . and then everything fell apart. The game was completed and released in Japan just fine, but its American localization got the axe in the 11th hour, leaving us with a software slate in '08 headlined by the likes of Wii Music. Ouch.

Maybe the content ended up being deemed too mature for Western audiences? Suda51, previously known for ending a 16-bit wrestling game story with a suicide, certainly had an opportunity to craft an even more severely shocking spectacle in this series filled with specters. And yet its story is not too outlandish – it chronicles the journey of three women returning to a haunted island where they were once held against their will as young girls. Their memories of the trauma they endured while kidnapped have been repressed, and they're hopeful that exploring the island as adults might reawaken those parts of their pasts. Meanwhile, the detective who originally rescued them in the past returns to explore the island as well, trying to settle his own unfinished business. Lots of ghosts end up involved, of course, but that's what Fatal Frame is.

Maybe the gameplay missed the mark, from NOA's point of view? Fatal Frame games task players to take photos of ghosts using the Camera Obscura, and getting a good, zoomed-in and well-timed snapshot is key to dealing damage and dispersing their spooky energy – but this sequel was criticized for being too easy, since it let the camera lock on to the ghosts and always keep them perfectly in frame. So combat was much easier.

Maybe NOA just got cold feet? All three previous Fatal Frame games had launched in English without any trouble, but with Nintendo at the helm, they might have chickened out and not wanted this game on the release schedule next to Animal Crossing: City Folk or Mario Super Sluggers. Though it would have really filled a gap!

Whatever the reason, we missed out on Suda's first (and only) first-party collab. And I'm afraid that, at this point, it'll never materialize here. **– LUCAS**

ORIGINAL RELEASE: Wii, JULY 31, 2008
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPERS: NINTENDO, TECMO & GRASSHOPPER MANUFACTURE

PLAYING IT TODAY

Though the planned official English-language release of Fatal Frame IV: Mask of the Lunar Eclipse was canned at the last minute in 2008, Western fans who'd gotten themselves hyped up for the launch didn't have to deal with the full severity of disappointment for long. Intrepid fan translators got to work almost immediately, and a complete English translation was made available just two years later in 2010. It's so well done that it solidified the legacy of this sequel, as well as the English name we use to refer to it – we don't know if "Mask of the Lunar Eclipse" actually would have been its final title or not. Officially, this game only has a Japanese name: "Zero: Tsukihaki no Kamen."

A LITTLE LEVITY

One of the biggest bummers resulting from Fatal Frame IV's lack of localization is the fact that American audiences didn't get to see its silly extra costumes! This is a franchise that takes itself and its stories incredibly seriously, which makes it all the more hilarious when you unlock the ability to totally change the tone of every scene by outfitting the protagonists in some kind of ridiculous get-up. Since Nintendo took over publishing duties for the series beginning with this sequel, a couple of cameo costumes drawn from the Big N's other brands where included: a Luigi look (paying homage to Luigi's own ghost-hunting adventures in the Mansion series), and Samus' Zero Suit (flip back to Page 40 to take a look at that one).

CHARACTER PROFILE
TRAVIS TOUCHDOWN

He'll soon be called upon to save humanity from the threat of alien invasion. But how did he rise up to be a loser no more and instead become a hero? Let's see!

FIRST APPEARANCE
NO MORE HEROES (Wii, 2008)

CAREER HIGHS

Thankfully, setting a new life goal for himself (becoming the world's #1 assassin) helps him get back out into the world and get active.

'08

Love can be a powerful motivation, and knowing Sylvia is waiting for him at the end of his second quest, Travis is once again successful.

'10

Outside of his own series, Travis gains Ultimate recognition when he earns a Tier 2 Super Smash Bros. debut. Have you played a match as Mii Travis yet?

'20

CAREER LOWS

'08

When we first meet Travis, he's got nothing going for him. He's 27, broke, living in a cheap motel and his only ambition in life is to watch anime.

'10

A few years after achieving the top spot, Travis is shocked to learn that his ranking's been downgraded and he has to fight back to first place.

'19

Estranged from his family, Travis bums his days away alone again, playing a new game console . . . and then he gets sucked inside it!

From zero to hero and then back again, Travis Touchdown's tale is proof that heroes don't always have a happily ever after when the credits have finished rolling. It takes an ongoing commitment to keep the happy ending from slipping away.

'21

Unfortunately, that kind of lifelong responsibility can be hard to handle for someone who's a selfish slacker at heart! Will Travis grow up a bit more in his next adventure, or will he end up back where he started again?

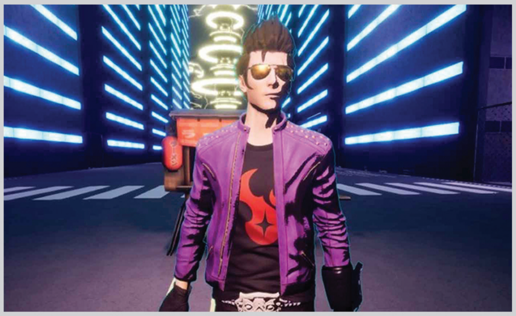
HIGHLIGHTS

NO MORE HEROES
Wii, 2008

One of the most famous "M for Mature" games released for Nintendo's almost entirely all-ages-aimed Wii console, No More Heroes introduced us to the truly immature Travis Touchdown and kicked off his career as a killer. Why did he decide to become an assassin? He won a beam katana auction online!

NO MORE HEROES 2: DESPERATE STRUGGLE
Wii, 2010

What's better than wielding a laser sword? Wielding two laser swords at the same time, of course! Travis' second game doubled down on the carnage and the comedy, and it earned even more critical praise than the first. But it didn't end up selling all that well!

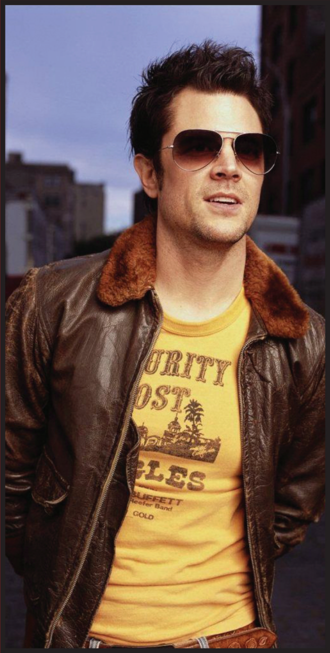


TRAVIS STRIKES AGAIN: NO MORE HEROES
SWITCH, 2019

Suda51, even after decades of directing games that have gotten glowing reviews, has always stayed humble. His connection with his roots is reflected in how he loves to signal boost indie devs – a signature feature of Travis' third appearance was his wardrobe of dozens of indie game T-shirts, like this one repping Dead Cells.

BY LUCAS M. THOMAS

> “I don’t care about titles or power. I just wanna be Number 1.”
>
> - NO MORE HEROES



HERE’S JOHNNY!

TRAVIS’ MTV INSPIRATION

One of the centerpieces of American pop culture in the early ’00s was an irreverent, obnoxious and explosively dangerous stunt and prank show on MTV, the name of which was a somewhat vulgar synonym for "donkey." When it came time for Suda51 to design the hero of No More Heroes a few years later, he still had that show’s star in mind: Travis Touchdown’s visual inspiration is none other than Johnny Knoxville. (A guy who’s still acting like a "donkey" to this day!)

WARP ZONE

What Nintendo Power was writing about way back when.

THE NINTENDO ULTRA 64.

The console formerly known as "Project Reality" was to be many things. It was to be the future for the company after the Super NES wound down. It was to be an innovative new platform that not only embraced 3D gaming, but helped redefine what it would be like. It would be a console that made four-player gaming with friends in the living room the norm, rather than an experience only available to those who were able to purchase special adapters (with money that could have gone toward more games). And at this point in Nintendo Power's history, it was one other thing more significant than all of these things combined.

It was delayed.

Originally, the Nintendo Ultra 64 was supposed to be ready by Christmas of 1995 – the anticipation by consumers so great that holiday sales of competing platforms were reportedly affected. Clearly, that didn't happen. Instead of boldly going into a new generation of gaming, the staff of Nintendo Power were forced to tread water as best as they could while the folks over in Japan pushed things back until April. To paraphrase the ad campaign of one such competitor, they were "not **e**."

In place of coverage of the newest and hottest 64-bit titles, NP filled the space with . . . other stuff. Does anyone remember Frantic Flea? Cutthroat Island? No, of course you don't. It's arguable whether even the people who wrote about them do.

On the other hand, while the well of hot new releases on the Super Power platform was drying up, maybe a new look at some older titles would do the trick instead? Maybe something like Super Mario Kart . . . but *online?* That was clearly enough to get six pages out of the way. Only 97 more to go!

NP covered the Vancouver-based video game school DigiPen previously, but what about the students there and what they were working on? Maybe more Mario is the trick; Yoshi's Island was already out last year, but some tips and tricks from the Super Dragon himself would no doubt still be of interest six months later, right? On the upside, Super Mario RPG was still coming in hot, so that could help carry things for a few more months, along with the 1995 NP Awards nominations.

It had been a rough few months, but at least the new release date for the Nintendo Ultra 64 was almost here, right? Well, not so fast.

The March 1996 issue ended with an Ultra 64-oriented interview with Genyo Takeda, but moreover, news that it was delayed – again. This time, September 30 would be the honest-to-goodness for-sure release date for North America, some five months after Japan got theirs in April. (Spoiler: They had to wait until June).

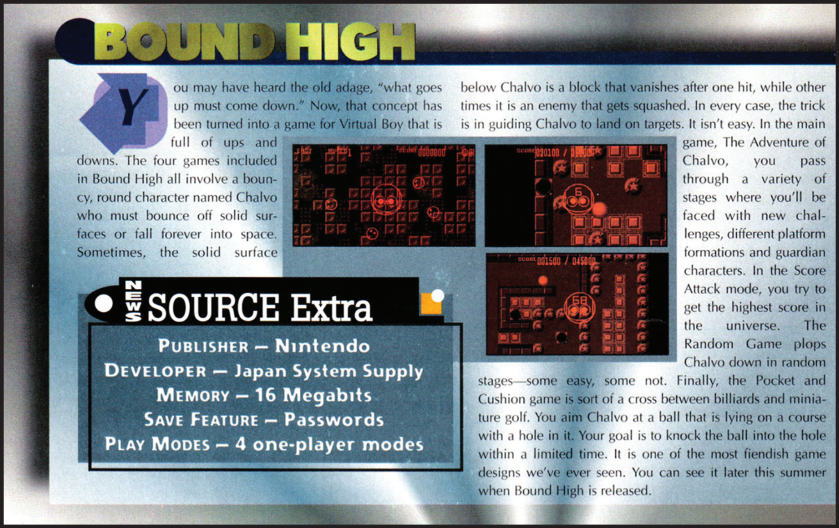
Oh, and it's just the Nintendo 64 now. For the first time, a Nintendo console would have a uniform name and look all across the globe.

For their part, the NP staff did their best to hold the fort and toe the line for the next several months. While April brought six pages of Star Wars: Shadows of the Empire, it also saw the NP crew dive into their well of tips and tricks (straight from the pros) harder than ever, with Earthworm Jim 2, Killer Instinct 2 (from the arcade, no less) and even The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past filling the pages. And for good measure, there was the Power Passwords Special, where they ran page after page of similar screenshots for various Super NES titles – with 20 for Boogerman alone!

Dark days, indeed. **– DAVID**

ISSUE #82: MARCH 1996

ISSUE #83: APRIL 1996



BOUND HIGH

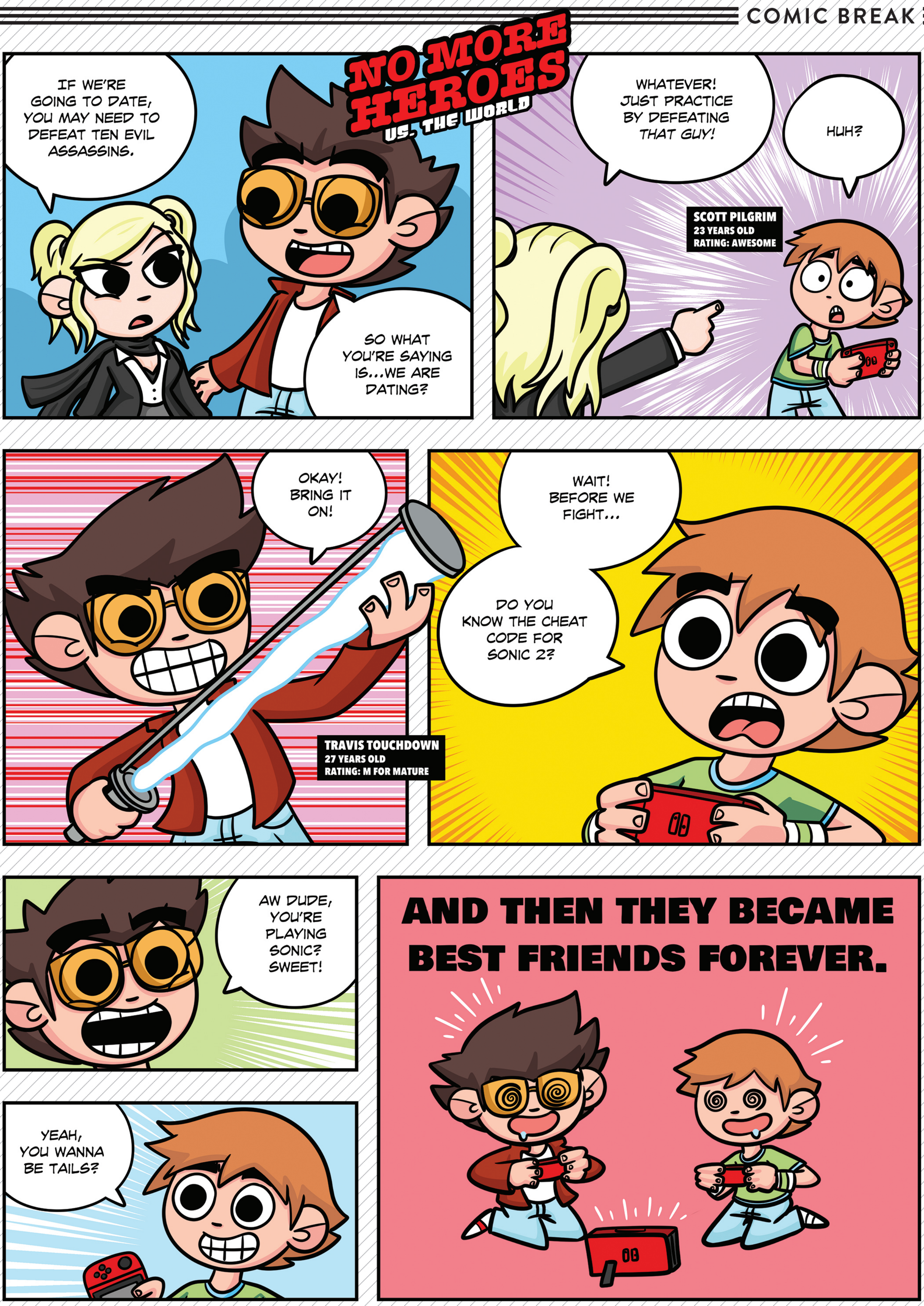
You may have heard the old adage, "what goes up must come down." Now, that concept has been turned into a game for Virtual Boy that is full of ups and downs. The four games included in Bound High all involve a bouncy, round character named Chalvo who must bounce off solid surfaces or fall forever into space. Sometimes, the solid surface below Chalvo is a block that vanishes after one hit, while other times it is an enemy that gets squashed. In every case, the trick is in guiding Chalvo to land on targets. It isn't easy. In the main game, The Adventure of Chalvo, you pass through a variety of stages where you'll be faced with new challenges, different platform formations and guardian characters. In the Score Attack mode, you try to get the highest score in the universe. The Random Game plops Chalvo down in random stages—some easy, some not. Finally, the Pocket and Cushion game is sort of a cross between billiards and miniature golf. You aim Chalvo at a ball that is lying on a course with a hole in it. Your goal is to knock the ball into the hole within a limited time. It is one of the most fiendish game designs we've ever seen. You can see it later this summer when Bound High is released.

NEWS SOURCE Extra

PUBLISHER – Nintendo
DEVELOPER – Japan System Supply
MEMORY – 16 Megabits
SAVE FEATURE – Passwords
PLAY MODES – 4 one-player modes

THE VIRTUAL BOY BEGINS TO FADE AWAY

Let's face it: Even at its height (which would have been . . . launch?), the Virtual Boy didn't have a lot of regular releases. But less than a year in, its star was already beginning to fade. In April, you could practically hear the drain being circled, as the only coverage came in Pak Watch for two titles: Dragon Hopper and Bound High – two first-party titles that wouldn't even make it in time for the funeral. Chalvo, we never knew you!



BY MATTHEW LOFFHAGEN

DATE OF BIRTH
January 2, 1968

PLACE OF BIRTH
Ueda, Nagano Prefecture, Japan

FAVORITE FOOD
Watermelon

LITTLE-KNOWN FACT
In high school I was on the badminton team and we actually won the Prefectural Championships for all of Nagano.

CURRENT POSITION IN THE INDUSTRY
CEO of Grasshopper Manufacture

BEST KNOWN FOR
Game designer for making games that are full of life; No More Heroes

GOICHI SUDA

We're honored to present our exclusive interview with Suda51 . . . comprised of 51 different questions!

INTERVIEW BY JONATHAN HOLMES

1) When you first started writing and directing games, what was your goal, and how has that goal changed over the years?
SUDA51: The first game I directed was for the Fire Pro Wrestling series. As the director, my only goal was to make sure that I and the team delivered the most well-crafted, perfectly done game possible. When that game is wrapped and ready to ship, the state of the final product is ultimately the director's responsibility, and they must put everything into the pursuit of making that game the best product it can be. We owe that to our players, the people who put their faith in us, and who are willing to invest their hard-earned cash into our work.

The first game I ever wrote was another Fire Pro Wrestling game that came shortly after my directorial debut. No one else at the company wanted to write it – they said they didn't know about wrestling storylines and didn't want to get it wrong, so it fell on me. That's when discovered I had a real, I don't know, *spark* for creating original stories. That's my job when I am a writer: to give people something that's totally eye-opening, like they've never seen before, that adds to their lives in some way, be it big or small.

My goals haven't changed since I first started writing and directing games.

2) Your style melds ultra-masculine pro wrestling on one side and absurd surrealism on the other, all peppered with an honest, lonely vulnerability that's more like something from British post-punk bands than your average video game. What do you think inspires you to draw all these influences together, and how do you think they complement each other?
When you ask me that question, my first thought is of how I was born and raised in a small town in Nagano prefecture, which is kind of out in the boonies. When I was in my teens and twenties, I got into bands like Joy Division, The Easy Cure, and that whole sort of genre in general. I feel a connection with those band's songs and their music in general, for a couple of reasons. One is likely because a lot of those guys in those bands are from similar climates as me. The place where I am from . . . during the winter it snows a lot, and there are times when, just for a moment, it seems the world is covered in nothing but snow, and the air is sort of crisp and harsh. On the days when it is really snowy in a town like that, you have a sort of loneliness – a melancholic feeling. That's the feeling I get from a lot of these songs by the bands I mentioned. They invoke a sort of quiet in me, but at the same time, there is a chaos and melancholic loneliness. I make a point to try to include that feeling in the games that I make as well.

3) Do you think you'll ever make a game about growing up playing badminton in a small town, listening to Joy Division, going to school in the snow and thinking about how you want to win that big match?
Yes, I promise I will try to make that game someday. *(laughs)*

4) I can't wait! And I think at this point in your career, people would be amazed to see you make something so peaceful, because in your games, the use of violence can be a little complicated. You're also a big fan of the Hotline Miami games, which make it fun, but morally uncomfortable, to be violent. What do you want your games to say about violence and violent people?
When I look at violence in games, violence in my own games, or in games like Hotline Miami, I guess you could say there is a certain type of violence I am drawn to as a writer and a creator. It's sort of hard to explain. The characters that I write in my games are obviously not normal people going through their everyday lives. They are the sort of people that live, like, on the dark fringes of society. There's a word we use in Japanese, and there is not really an English equivalent . . . so to make it simpler I am going to call them "citizens." When I refer to citizens, I mean just regular, normal people. Not mafia, criminals or psycho killers. I don't want to portray the violence that occurs between citizens or just random people killing each other.

I feel that the games that I create are themed around life and the value of life, but the characters that I portray do not put as much value on life, and sometimes, as a result, not much value is put on their lives either. They are sort of offering up their lives in what they are doing; assassins that are going out and getting in bloody, deadly battles. That's different than . . . well, let's just say I don't want to portray the sort of violence you get in the real world where some random guy is just killing another random guy, where some guy gets shot and dies in two seconds. I feel like that is too gritty, too ugly.

But I do like portraying these characters who decide "OK, I'm going to give up my life and do the thing that I want to do," even if that's being an assassin or a psycho killer. I feel in games like Hotline Miami in particular, there is a sort of fear in the way this violence and the characters are portrayed. When I play Hotline Miami I think, "If in real life I suddenly turn into Jacket (the game's main character) and I decide I am going to go out and do the same things that this guy's doing . . . I would probably be dead in like two or three seconds," *(laughs)* and that strange fear that creeps up on me in the game is something I like and am excited by.

So yes, I don't want to portray the realistic violence you would see in the real world. I would rather show the sort of people that are perpetrating violence that feels real without actually evoking the offense of real-life fear or violence like someone getting offed on the streets. I'd like to portray these characters and their violent acts in an over-the-top way, while keeping a bit of reality in there at the same time, to make sure I get the point across that yeah, it might be fun to do this stuff, but violence is a scary, terrible thing that you should be afraid of and not glorifying.

That makes a lot of sense. They're almost like games about monsters, like vampires or werewolves, who live among people in the modern world, but not really *with* them, and so they live by different rules. They struggle with the same things that real people do, but in more extreme, fantastic ways. Then we the players can work out our own real-life struggles through these fantasies in the game.

Huh. Yeah. It is like that in a way.

You did an amazing job with this theme of being a monster on the outskirts of society in Travis Strikes Again. I think it was some of your best writing yet.

Oh, thank you very much!

5) About that game, I've been wondering, at one point Ubisoft was the co-owner of the No More Heroes IP, right? Is that part of why there was such a big time gap between the release of No More Heroes 2 and Travis Strikes Again, and are there any other IPs you've worked on where the sequels might be held up by the outside publishers, like Lollipop Chainsaw or Killer7?
Actually, to be specific about the rights for No More Heroes, Ubisoft did have some of the distribution rights at one point, but as far as the actual ownership of the IP, that has always been split between Marvelous and Grasshopper Manufacture. But to answer the more general question with IPs, most of the time it's impossible to move them around. With games like Lollipop Chainsaw and Killer7, a lot of people have been asking me if I'm going to bring them back and what I'm going to do with them. The fact is, as much as I'd like to, it can be really difficult because companies don't tend to let go of IPs that they've already had their hands on. It would be great if some kind of deal could be reached someday, or if something could come about where I would be able to maybe bring back one or two of these IPs, but because it really is sort of a rare occurrence for these IPs to change hands, I am not sure if that actually is going to be possible.

6) And EA owns at least one of these IPs, Shadows of the *[bleep]*, which you revisited in a shocking, amazing way in Travis Strikes Again. I was also surprised that both Travis Strikes Again and No More Heroes III feature a character named Damon Riccitiello. Fans have guessed he's based on John Riccitiello, the former CEO of EA who you worked with on Shadows of the *[bleep]*. What inspired you to create this character?
When I was working with EA, I was actually working through an agency called CAA (Creative Artists Agency), under a guy name Seamus (Blackley, co-creator of the original Xbox). I was working with him a lot, and at one point, I was going to name the character you're talking about after him, but in the end I went with the Damon name instead. The reason for that is because, at the time, there were only a few people I'd met in the industry who were that powerful and had that much clout. John Riccitiello was one of those guys. He was probably the guy, out of all of the people that I'd met at that time, who held the most power in that regard. The reason I decided to give the character that name was because I wanted to base him off someone who was extremely powerful in their respective industry or business. And because the name was interesting sounding. It has a cool feel to it when you said it out loud.

7) Following up on that, with his fourth game (No More Heroes III) on the horizon, how would you say Travis' journey through the world of video games mirrors your own?
Well, it's been over 10 years since the

NOTE: THIS INTERVIEW WAS CONDUCTED ON DECEMBER 14TH, 2020, THE INTERVIEWER'S BIRTHDAY. IT HAS BEEN EDITED FOR CLARITY AND BREVITY.

last numbered game in the series in real life, and in the game's story too. In the game industry, that's a fairly long time. Since then all sorts of studios have been shut down, and lots of other in-house studios have been closed or absorbed into whatever larger company ate them up. Then, on the other hand, there have been lots of studios and companies that have popped up and really thrived in that time. With No More Heroes III, there is a parallel process. The team on this game is actually not the same group I worked with on 1 and 2. It's the team I made Travis Strikes Again with, which was released not too long ago.

I feel like I can't say it enough, but over the past 10 years, so much has changed in so many ways, with me, Grasshopper as a company, technology as a whole, and even the environment. Grasshopper has moved and dealt with other companies, I've worked on a lot of other series with many different people, and I've experienced . . . a lot of things. I am the same at my core, but there's no denying that I have been affected deeply by all this. My team has experienced a lot of things too, though the No More Heroes III team is still pretty new. This is actually just the second game I've worked on with them, and while there are some veterans that I've known for a while working alongside them, the bulk of the team is comprised of younger, fresh-faced industry people. I think of the team as an organism all its own, alive with "beginner's mind," taking fresh chances as it gets to know itself.

In No More Heroes III, I want to portray that youthfulness and newness, that sort of inexperiencedness, mixed with a veteran's heart and familiar feelings. Like in the first two games, it's Travis going up against up against a bunch of stylish, powerful rivals. Unlike the first two games, where there were competitions against established assassins in a known association, No More Heroes III is going to have . . . a lot of new elements to it. *(laughs)* I don't want to spoil it, but in giving both the character of Travis and the players this sort of new experience, I want them to feel like they don't know what to expect – like they never know exactly how things are going to go, while at the same time experiencing something like coming home. I wanted to put out that sort of vibe in order to reflect the way the team was working.

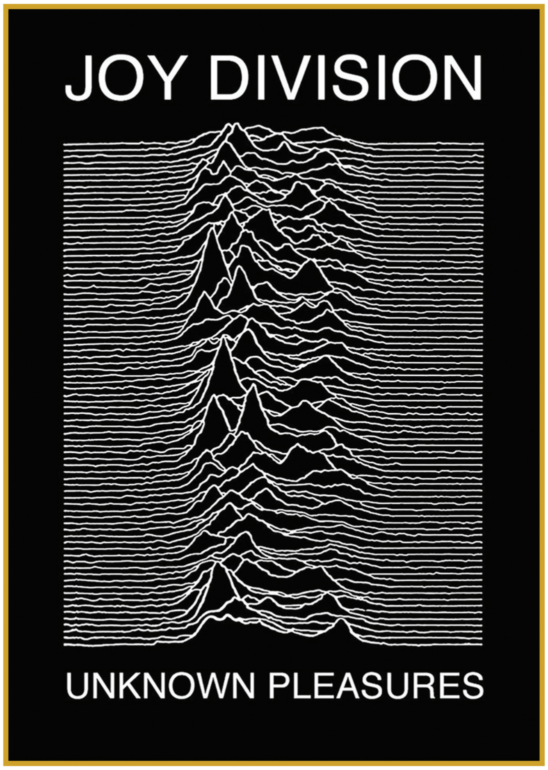
So yeah, at the risk of repeating myself, I want fans to be reassured that the No More Heroes III team is all made up of people I've worked with before, and some of them are industry veterans, but at the core of the group is a special relationship between young and old where both sides are learning from each other, and there's a lot to it where we just don't know how it's going to turn out until we try it. There's also things that we simply cannot see how they'll turn out at all, maybe even after the game is done. The game, and the team making it, are like old friends getting together with new friends, all deciding in unison that it's time to go to new places, with it all built on a foundation that everyone is familiar with.

8) Given how the game features aliens reuniting with childhood friends, that makes a lot of sense. It also looks like Travis' Power Glove-esque gear from Travis Strikes Again got some Switch-specific hardware upgrades. Am I right in thinking it might even have Joy-Cons inside it now? I know you probably can't get into too many details, but can you talk about your general approach toward incorporating the spirit of the Switch into No More Heroes III? The first game incorporated so many Wii Remote-specific features that really sucked you in, like holding the controller up to your face like a phone when Sylvia called, and, of course, the motion controls for fighting and, uh, charging your weapon . . .

Thank you for saying that, and yes, like No More Heroes 1 and 2 on the Wii, the answer to this question would probably lie with the Joy-Cons? *(laughs)* Without going into too much detail, we've put a lot of effort into making sure to take advantage of the Joy-Cons as much as possible. For example, using both controllers at once using the motion controls . . . *(He pauses, then seems to decide to hold back a bit.)* . . . Let's just say there's going to be a lot of stuff in No More Heroes III that we're only able to do because it's on the Switch, things we were inspired to do because of the specific technologies of the Switch and the way the Joy-Cons work.

9) Speaking of Travis and the Switch, the last we heard, Lollipop Chainsaw was your best-selling multiplatform game. Now that No More Heroes 1 and 2 are on Switch, is Travis closing the gap? I'd hope his appearance in Smash as a Mii costume helped his numbers to pick up . . .

Yeah, thankfully No More Heroes 1 and 2 have been selling really well on the Switch. That plus some of the other



POST-PUNK INFLUENCE

Classic British post-punk bands like Joy Division, The Smiths and The Cure are swimming in the undercurrent of Suda51's work. Sometimes their presence is subtle, like how Garcia Hotspur's jacket in Shadows of the *[bleep]* has "Dead Souls," the title of one of Joy Division's last songs, written on its sleeves. Other times it's overt, like with the current marketing push for No More Heroes III. To help communicate what the game is about, Grasshopper reappropriated the band's "Unknown Pleasures" album cover for T-shirts worn by both Suda and Travis, as well for swag given out at promotional events in Japan.

So what does their music sound like, and how does their style relate to how Suda's games actually play? Well, like most of Grasshopper's originals, Joy Division was punk in that they never tried to fit in, but they went beyond basic rebellion with their capacity to be self-reflective, forgoing blunt destructivity for something more vulnerable, and oftentimes unabashedly sad. Instead of simply belting out battle cries against the establishment, their songs are like messages found in bottles, dropped in the ocean by stranded castaways; isolated, desperate, but sparkling with an electricity that can't be held back. They weaved soft beauty and intense pain together for a sound that was as compelling as it was abrasive. That's something Suda's games have done since Day 1.

installments of the series that have been released since have been helpful in closing the sales gap between the entirety of the No More Heroes franchise and Lollipop Chainsaw. Also, Travis' inclusion in Smash Bros. was something I was really stoked about. To be honest, I'd really like to see him appear in the game as a fighter too, and can't tell the fans enough how much I really, really appreciated how they got behind Travis in that effort. Just talking about it now, I'm hit with amazement that he was able to be in the game as a Mii costume at all, and hopefully in the next iteration of Smash, the fans can reunite to again say "Put Travis in there!", and just maybe this time they'll get their wish.

Either way, I am really happy that Travis got this opportunity, and I also want to say, with No More Heroes 1 & 2 being available on Switch, it's about more than just the raw sales. The thing that makes me the most excited and happy is knowing it's a fresh start for players who may not have gotten the chance to play them the first time around, or may not even be aware of the games at all, to have the first part of the series right there at their fingertips, ready to start anew. Then hopefully, if they try them and enjoy them, they'll get into the upcoming games from there.

10) Given what you just told us, I feel I can ask without you being afraid of spoilers: If Travis were a fighter in Smash, what would his stage and theme music be?
Even though there are a lot of interesting places in Santa Destroy, the city Travis calls home, I am pretty sure that Travis' stage would be the No More Heroes Motel, the place where he sleeps and stays and keeps his motorcycle and everything. It's set up perfectly because it's a long, two-story building with the roof up on top. So for a spot to "smash," it should be just right.

As far as the music goes, there's lots of songs in the series so far, but the theme that we've used ever since the first game has been at the core of it all, so it would almost definitely be the No More Heroes theme song.

I can picture it now, and it's such a fun thought. Maybe you could get that theme music in just for the Mii costume as DLC for Ultimate? If you did, that's the only character I would ever play. Me, dressed as Travis, fighting to that song . . .

(Suda laughs.)

11) This crossover in Smash is just one of many of amazing collaborations you've been a part of over the years. You've teamed up with massive names like James Gunn (Guardians of the Galaxy) and Hideo Kojima (Metal Gear Solid), as well as smaller but equally brilliant names like Denaton (Hotline Miami) and Shawn Alexander Allen (Treachery in Beatdown City), just to name a few. Are there any other creatives that you'd like to team up with in the future? Like maybe a fashion brand, or some other artist outside of gaming, or maybe even work on a film adaptation? Like take on an old Hollywood IP that's filled with potential like, I don't know, Buckaroo Banzai?

(At this point Suda asked me to explain what Buckaroo Banzai is, and it took a while. As I explained, he looked up the movie on his phone and laughed a few times, ooh-ing and ahh-ing here and there.)

You know, I've never actually seen this movie before, but it sounds right up my alley. Just hearing about it makes me feel like it's my style, like something I would totally be into.

After No More Heroes III, the next game I'm going to be making is going to be a whole new IP. There's not really much I can say about it just yet, but I feel it is probably going to be something really similar to what you just described in Buckaroo Banzai. I want everyone to really look forward to it. It's going to really be kind of, for lack of a better term, a screwed-up game, with lots of just crazy stuff in it. Yeah, I definitely feel a lot of similarity between what I just heard described of Buckaroo Banzai and my upcoming IP. So please look forward to that.

OK . . . this is the best birthday present, hearing that you're working on a game like Buckaroo Banzai. It's the best birthday present I could have asked for. OK! I don't want to walk away from this topic at all right now, but you probably don't have much more time and we still have a lot of questions to go until we get to 51, so I'm just going to try to enjoy what I just heard for what it's worth and move on.

OK, I understand. You'll find out more someday, don't worry.

12) That's great. I really can't wait! And next we have a question about Star Wars, one of your favorite franchises. No More Heroes is actually filled with Star Wars tributes and reappropriations, from the Beam Katanas to Travis' black glove-powered Force Choke attack, so I

TRAVIS IN OTHER MEDIA

Travis Touchdown is the first of Suda's creations to become a bonafide multimedia sensation. In fact, his first appearance technically wasn't in a game – it was on rolls of toilet paper! At a 2007 launch event for No More Heroes, Suda handed out rolls of bathroom tissue featuring Travis and other key characters from the game printed right on the plies, giving fans the opportunity to blow their noses and wipe their patooties with the white stuff well before they returned home with the new Wii title.

Not long afterward, Travis appeared in a trio of Flash games for i-mode (a Japan-only mobile Internet service), a motion comic called No More Heroes 1.5 (a prequel to Desperate Struggle that pitted him against an evil look-alike), and also . . . an experimental jazz album? Called The Outer Rim, it features a few remixes from the No More Heroes score, including tracks where Travis and Sylvia reveal that they are still alive 120 years in the future, now immortal, madly in love, legally wed and living in outer space! It will be quite a hoot if No More Heroes III ends in the same way.

have to ask, if you got to write and direct Star Wars: Episode X, what would it be about?
If I was going to write and direct a Star Wars: Episode X, there would be two main characters. Basically, one would probably be . . . somebody's son. Yeah, I would want to do it in a different style than The Mandalorian, but in terms of substance, it would still be like a buddy movie, with two characters traveling around the galaxy. This time, though, they would probably be a major Star Wars character's son and, since everybody loves this character so much, I would be sure to bring Jar Jar Binks back as the co-star. *(laughs)* So basically, it would be a buddy movie with somebody's son and Jar Jar Binks. That's my idea.

(Laughing hard, trying to contain it in order to get out the follow-up question.) **The fact that you're so vague about everything else about your pitch . . . but you're sure about . . . you're like, "The main character is somebody's son, but who cares whose son it is? Because guess what gang, Jar Jar Binks is the other guy, and that's the good news. That's the part I want you to be sure of."**

Yes! I want everyone to know!

13) *(Still laughing.)* OK, OK, so Jar Jar . . . say what you will about him . . . I actually think he's a pretty decent guy, but regardless of if you like him or not, there's no denying he's got a really memorable name. I mean, we're still talking about him, now, like 20 years later. When it comes to that, how do you approach naming your characters, to make sure they strike that kind of a chord with people?
I like to give all my characters, but especially main characters, names that will really stick out in your mind and get your brain buzzing. In order to do that, I think about all kinds of stuff, pull from all sorts of roots, when I'm putting character names together. Sometimes I like to take things like a common name, and an object or something, and mash them together. Sometimes they're drawn from things that just make me happy or put a certain taste in my mouth. Still, it's not that easy. I generally tend to think really, really hard until I come up with a name that sort of hits me, and I say, "Yeah . . . I can remember this, people can remember this . . . it feels good to say . . . it's got a ring to it . . . so that's the one." But to your point, yes, definitely, the main purpose in the naming process is giving characters something so they can become something recognizable, and someone that players will remember really easily.

It almost sounds like writing a chorus to a pop song. It's got to be something catchy that people will remember.

Yeah, that's pretty much how I see coming up with the names.

14) In No More Heroes III, will Travis have any indie game shirts to grab people's attention, like he did with Travis Strikes Again? Or maybe he'll own some indie magazines like . . . Nintendo Force? *(laughs)*
Yeah, for Travis Strikes Again, we did a collaboration with a really big number of indie games and creators, as well as with Nintendo themselves for some Zelda shirts. We even got a cameo from Link's horse Epona in the story mode. For No More Heroes III, we have decided to go in a different direction with the whole collaboration thing. Unfortunately, now there's not really a whole lot I can say about it. Let's just say it's going to be a different style of collaboration, and we hope to talk more about it soon.

15) OK, now for some rapid-fire questions. When someone says the word "Famicom" to you, what's the first word or game you think of?
Spartan-X. (A game starring Jackie Chan that was localized as Kung Fu on NES in America.)

16) PC Engine?
Kato & Ken. (A game based on a Japanese comedy show. The game was retitled J.J. & Jeff in the USA.)

17) Ah . . . you know, sometimes I'd swear we were separated at birth. And how about for the Super Famicom?
Super Mario Bros.? *(laughs)* Actually, for Super Famicom I'd have to say Fire Pro Wrestling, not because I worked on the series myself, but because before I even got into making video games I played the Fire Pro series. So, for Super Famicom the thing that resonates with me the most is Fire Pro.

18) Mega Drive?
Mazin Saga: Mutant Fighter. It's based on Mazinger Z by Go Nagai (creator of Devilman).

19) Oh that's perfect. That makes perfect sense too, given your games. And how about the Nintendo 64?
I didn't actually have a 64 myself, but I'd still say . . . a 3D Mario? *(laughs)*

20) And the Game Boy?
I also didn't have a Game Boy. I haven't really played much on the Game Boy, so I don't really have an answer for this one. It fills me with a kind of emptiness. *(laughs)*

21) PlayStation?
Demolition Derby.

22) Dreamcast?
For Dreamcast it would probably be Giant Gram, a pro wrestling game. I think that it might have been French? Hmmm, I'm worried that your readers won't know what I'm talking about. *(He looks the game up on his phone.)* Ah! It looks like it was probably released outside of Japan. *(smiles)*

23) How about Xbox?
I was thinking Burnout, but . . . that wasn't it. Ah, I know! There was one game that you might be familiar with, it was based on the Vietnam War. It was similar to a lot of combat games out now. The name of the game was taken from a famous war-based magazine?

That immediately makes me think of Spec Ops: The Line, but I think that was on the Xbox 360 . . .

(interrupting) Oh! Jet Set Radio Future! I played the *[bleep]* out of that. Can you just go with that?

24) *(laughs)* That's perfect, thank you. And can you tell us about a game from any era, on any console, that you really enjoy, but that you're not sure if anyone else has ever heard of?
Oh definitely. The first thing that comes to mind is a game for PlayStation where you use a time machine, and you go further and further back in history. It's called Time Commando and it's really cool. I actually cleared it before! It was really interesting and strange, almost like controlling a movie. I really liked the weird nicknames that the game had.

25) You know, this seems like the perfect time to say that one of our readers thinks you're sort of like the Columbo of games, because just like that character, you act like just a regular guy, but underneath it all, your wheels are really turning. Have you seen that show? The one about the detective?
Yes, I really liked that show growing up, and it's a real compliment to be compared to that character. Thank you.

26) What's one of your favorite books you read this year?
I haven't read a single book yet this year, but I did get really into a cartoon called Demon Hunters . . . or is it called Demon Killers? I'm not sure how it was renamed outside of Japan, but it's a huge hit around the world right now. *[Editor's Note: It's called Demon Slayer: Kimetsu No Yaiba.]* You should probably check it out. I watched every single episode of that.

27) If you had to throw away your favorite T-shirt or your favorite pair of jeans, which would you sacrifice?
Oh that's hard. OK, if I had to choose just one it's got to be . . . the jeans.

28) Have you ever been in a fistfight?
I haven't not *never* been in a fistfight. *(laughs)* What I'm trying to say is, I have a bit of a checkered past.

29) Who is your favorite Western superhero?
Recently, I've really gotten into Quicksilver. But you know, I was sure you were going to ask more about Star Wars. If you did, I would have told you that my favorite Jedi is Luke.

30) What's your favorite pizza topping?
This is going to sound super weird outside Japan, but . . . crab mayonnaise. The crab mayonnaise pizza you can get here in Japan is super good.

31) Who was your first anime/manga crush?
Fujiko from the Lupin series. I was about to say something I realize I shouldn't but . . . I had a poster of her on my wall that I thought about a lot. Do you know who I'm talking about? *(I reassure him that a lot of people in the West love this character as well and he laughs knowingly.)*

32) What's Suda's favorite soda?
There's one that I'm pretty sure is only in Japan. It's called Dekavita C and it's basically an old-school, super weak energy drink. It's not as full-on as Red Bull. It's one of the only energy drinks we had here 20 years ago. It's got a really weird-tasting, super Japan-specific flavor to it.

33) One of our readers told us that they named their Sudowoodo Pokémon "Sudo51" and they transferred it all the way from HeartGold to the modern games. It's like their favorite childhood friend. How does that make you feel?
(Stares in shock for a long time, then asks the interpreter to re-explain this, then explain it again, just to make sure

he understands. Then after thinking about it for a while he says . . .)

Please tell your reader "Thanks for taking care of me."

34) What's your favorite Tom Hanks movie?
Road to Perdition.

35) What's one of your favorite toppings for rice?
"Suta-don." (Pork fried with garlic, etc.)

36) What's your favorite American food?
In-N-Out Burger.

37) Have you ever sat on the toilet and saved your game while playing one of the No More Heroes games on the Switch?
Of course!

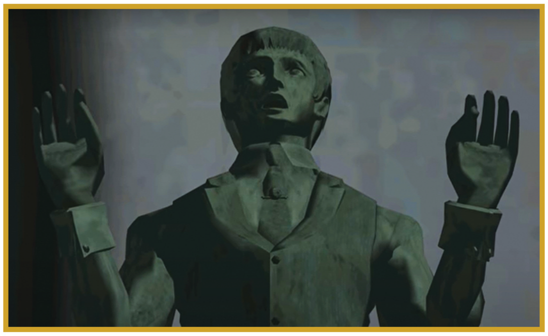
38) If there were a game starring Ash from Evil Dead and H*boy, would you want Travis to be a guest star, and if so, how would he react to meeting those two characters?**
Yes, Travis would love that, and he'd start off by having a beer with them, obviously!

39) In short, what do the words "masculine" and "feminine" mean to you?
Right now, I feel that masculine, or being a "real man" to me would entail being able to take anything that's being thrown at you, take responsibility for your *[bleep]* and keep pressing on. The ability to do that represents masculinity.

As for feminine, as opposed to masculine, that's the ability to sort of take everything that's being thrown at you and deal with it. You could say it would be represented by the ability to wrap everything up in a tender, loving way; the ability to take care of people. To press on in that way.

40) Warren Spector, developer of Deus Ex and Epic Mickey, once said that Lollipop Chainsaw was a game that should have never been made. Are there any games, characters or other pieces of art that you wish had never been made? Please don't say Jar Jar! He's already had all he can take . . . *(laughs)*
Every character and every piece of art has its own raison d'être. I feel that both characters and artwork have reasons for existing.

Maybe what shouldn't exist are people who nitpick other people's games because they want the attention. I feel it's best to shut up and focus on one's own games.



CINEMATIC PARALLELS

There is a question all artists have to face: Will they make "fine art" that appeals to critics but turns off the mainstream, or go for "commercial art" that has more mass appeal but less of a message? If you're Suda51, the answer is "Why don't we have both?" In the gallery world, this leveled playing field between "high" and "low" art is called "Superflat." It's a strategy Suda uses liberally when borrowing from motion pictures.

On the surface, Grasshopper regularly samples Hollywood-friendly stuff like Star Wars, Superman, Rocky, The Matrix and even real-life starlets like Sylvia Kristel. For long-term fans of his work, it's almost become routine. (Actually, the biggest surprise to come out of these references is that no one's sued him yet.) Suda did, at one point, say that the beam katanas in No More Heroes were inspired by "The Schwartz" laser swords in Spaceballs and not by lightsabers, though that ended up being a mild fib designed to keep the lawyers at bay.

Beneath the surface, Suda tends to take more from surrealist directors like David Lynch, Alejandro Jodorowsky and Wim Winters. Though Travis Touchdown's style borrows heavily from Johnny Knoxville, his name, and his son's, actually come from Paris, Texas; a somber, meditative, dreamlike film about searching for emotional connection. No More Heroes 1 and 2 both take a lot from the movie, visually and thematically.

41) If you had to go to outer space, what's the one thing you'd be sure to bring with you outside of the essentials (food, clothes, etc.)?
My Switch.

42) What's a good piece of advice that you've picked up from friends or family?
"Don't keep yourself small!" — Yuji Honjo

43) If someone has never played one of your games before, which one would you advise them to start with?
No More Heroes.

44) What's a skill, unrelated to game development, that you wish you could master?
Doing captures like Mario does in Super Mario Odyssey.

45) Who is a celebrity you'd like to see considered for the role of Travis in a live-action No More Heroes movie?
Joseph Gordon-Levitt.

46) Who is your favorite character from Nintendo's first (and only!) Pro Wrestling game on the Famicom?
Starman!

47) Do you think you'll ever retire?
When I die.

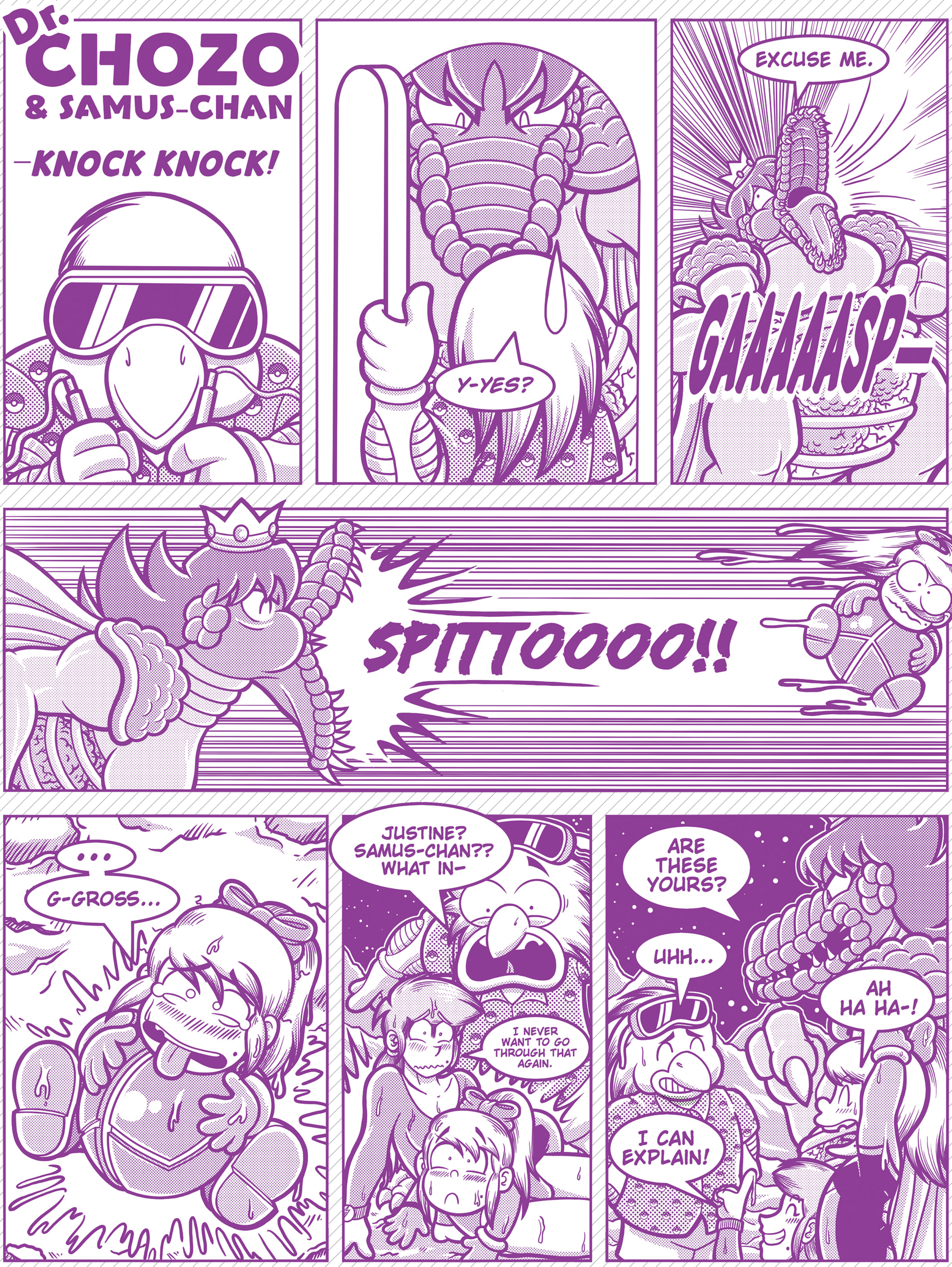
48) When you hear the term "game industry," what's the first word you think of?
"E3."

49) If you could make another game using any of Nintendo's first-party franchises, what would it be?
The Mysterious Murasame Castle (Nazo no Murasame Jō). It's a Kurosawa-style samurai action game on the Famicom.

50) If you could have any superpower, what would it be and why?
A symbiote. It would truly be an unimaginable experience.

51) Which one of these questions was your favorite?
#51!

Thank you Suda-san. This was an interview I'll never forget.
Thank for the excellent questions, Jonathan. You always take good care of me. And happy birthday!



BY THOR THORVALDSON

REVIEWS

Bowser is back, and he's bigger, badder and madder than ever before! Can the unlikely alliance of Mario & Bowser Jr. keep King Koopa from being totally consumed by darkness? Find out in our full review of **Super Mario 3D World + Bowser's Fury!**

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: NINTENDO RATING: E

Fun for Four (and More!)

SUPER MARIO 3D WORLD + BOWSER'S FURY

ANOTHER MARIO MASTERPIECE has arrived on the Switch.

Players of Nintendo's home console and portable hybrid have already been spoiled for choice when it comes to Super Mario installments – the last four years have brought us the grand original adventure of Odyssey, a way to build our own Mushroom Kingdoms in Maker 2 and a bevy of ports of past classics, including 64, Sunshine and Galaxy. Even the NES and SNES eras are available by way of the Nintendo Switch Online service! You can spend an afternoon experiencing a majority of the entire Super saga on this one single system, and that's incredible.

But one major puzzle piece has been missing: 2013's Super Mario 3D World, originally released for Wii U. With the sheer quantity of Wii U-to-Switch conversions exhibited by the Big N from the very beginning of this latest hardware generation, we knew it was only a matter of time before this one appeared. The question, then, became how it would arrive.

Would we get a barebones port with no extra content? Would we get some kind of Deluxe edition with new levels or new playable characters included? Or would it be something else we hadn't considered?

The answer is a mixed one. Super Mario 3D World itself has received enhancements, but none so extreme as to justify the addition of the "Deluxe" name that past ports have gotten. Rather, the cherry on top this time is an entirely new game tossed in alongside the Wii U adventure as an unexpectedly amazing free extra! (History has taught us that Nintendo has no qualms about reselling decade-old games again at full retail price with no bonus content to speak of, so yes, it's justifiable to think of Bowser's Fury as a freebie.) Together, the value of the ported 2013 experience + the brand-new 2021 quest makes this combo package an unskippable addition to all Switch owners' libraries – and yes, I'm prepared to award it the title of masterpiece right out of the gates.

A POINT OF CONVERGENCE

Let's give both parts of the package individual attention. First up, Super Mario 3D World!

When it was first released back in the Wii U days, this game somehow magically managed to serve as the successor to *at least* five separate threads in the Super Mario tapestry.

For starters, it was a direct sequel to 2011's Super Mario 3D Land on the 3DS. That game was mostly made to showcase the glasses-free stereoscopic 3D visuals of that portable's unique screen technology, but structurally it also 3D-ified the original Super Mario Bros. gameplay formula of running and jumping through individual stages and ultimately reaching a flagpole as a goal. Super Mario 3D World retained that structure, and even cheekily subverted players' expectations on a few occasions – sometimes the flagpole is a fake one (an illusion projected by Boos), and in one wild level it actually picks itself up and runs away from you!

The second thread that 3D World continues is the one 3D Land tied back to – Super Mario Bros. itself. It's not just flagpoles at the end of the levels. It's Goombas and Koopa Troopas on patrol. It's Super Mushrooms and Fire Flowers and Question Blocks full of coins. It's classic callbacks like green Warp Pipes that take you to some new place, placed right alongside fresh reimaginings of those ideas, like the Clear Pipes that let you see the heroes' trajectories and direct them.

It's a successor to the 3D Mario legacy, building off the Galaxy games from the generation prior. Granted, it's much more linear than those adventures, and their lineage wouldn't really be picked up until Odyssey. But, from the perspective of Wii U owners in 2013, this was the next step.

It carries the torch of the New Super Mario Bros. series' Wii and Wii U installments, in that it's built with four-player multiplayer in mind! And then, hand-in-hand, it also honors and

pays homage to Super Mario Bros. 2. The New Super games gave us four-player fun, but Players 3 and 4 were both just nameless Toads, and all four characters played in exactly the same way. Here, the original '80s cartoon team of Mario, Luigi, Princess Peach and Toad (*the* Toad; the original named member of his shroomy species) are back together again, and their unique character traits from Super Mario Bros. 2 are restored to them: Mario's the all-arounder, Luigi jumps the highest, Peach can hover horizontally to leap the furthest and Toad is the fleetest of foot.

We could go even deeper! 3D World calls back to Super Mario Bros. 3 by bringing back the Super Leaf to give the heroes raccoon tails once more. It lets them hide inside Koopa Shells and spin themselves forward, as first seen in the first New Super Mario Bros. on the DS. It has an entire level that exists entirely to reference the Mario Kart series!

Basically, 3D World is the point of convergence for all things Mario that existed before it, and it wonderfully upholds and expands upon each and every one of their legacies. Nintendo's brand has grown to be so wrapped up in nostalgia that it's important to note when a game does so well in tapping into it. This one does.

BLAZING NEW TRAILS

I would have adored Super Mario 3D World if all it did was overwhelm me with childhood memories, but all of those callbacks simply laid the foundation. The rest of the game then built upon it with inspired brand-new ideas.

The Super Bell is the new signature item of note, as grabbing one garbs Mario and his pals in furry cat suits. In feline form, the heroes can scratch foes to defeat them, claw their way straight up walls and dive diagonally down through the air with a powerful pounce. It's a brilliant addition to the growing Mario wardrobe, made even better by expert level design that's built to make being a cat feel as fun as possible. There are Cat Suit-specific elements spread throughout several stages, and the game is generous with providing Super Bells for you to be able to power up properly when you reach those segments. In fact, if you come across a Bell or any other item that you don't need right away, you can store it for later and call upon it on the fly when you do need it. (Hey, that's a connection back to Super Mario World!)

Older Mario ideas get refreshed in playful ways too, like fireballs now being able to be flung through Clear Pipes to strike enemies waiting on the opposite side. The White Tanooki Suit makes a comeback from 3D Land, granting endless invincibility if you have too much trouble clearing any particularly tricky course (a big plus for accessibility). The Invincibilty Star finds new life as the centerpiece of some cloud-in-the-sky coin rushes, and its power of imperviousness can be passed to other players by touching them – only one person has to snag the Star for the whole team to benefit.

MULTIPLAYER MUSINGS

Speaking of teams, you might want to assemble one to play through this quest . . . or you might not! There are benefits and drawbacks to every way to play.

3D World is fun to play solo, as you can move at your own pace and pick how to approach each challenge. Many moments are much easier to handle alone, like sequences that involve the character-cloning Double Cherry item.

But adding one, two or three friends or family members can create moments of memory-making magic. Working together with partners – to take advantage of multiplayer-only mechanics like lifting and tossing your fellow heroes – feels rewarding.

Unless your partners pick you up and toss you into a pit!

Yes, it's that classic Nintendo multiplayer dynamic of cooperation versus competition, as your squad could squash Bowser's minions like a well-oiled machine, or else everything could descend into chaos as getting to each next goal pole turns into "every man for himself."

Usually it's a mixture of both. As always, my primary playtesters were my sons Carter and Calvin, and we played a large chunk of the campaign as the trio of Mario, Luigi and Toad. We sometimes succeeded in helping one another – other times, acting too much in our own individual interests caused more frustration than fun. When playing with two, three or four people, the person who scores the most points in a level gets to wear a special crown afterward. As long as the race to earn that honor stays all in good fun, it's smiles all around. But if, say, a 9-year-old and 7-year-old start to squabble a little too seriously about it, then it can diminish the experience.

TWEAKS ON SWITCH

On the whole, Super Mario 3D World is still spectacular. And while it didn't get any major additions in this new Switch edition, it has quite a lot of minor adjustments that make things better. Control is smoother, as characters can now move in any direction instead of being locked into eight-way motion. Movement speed is faster – each hero

has had his or her running speed boosted by about 30%, which livens everything up a touch. (Though the speed boost does make some levels a little harder to handle than before.) There are subtle new animations. Really, Nintendo's designers just saw that they had a chance to go back and apply one more coat of polish to what was previously a perfectly wonderful finished product, and now the whole thing shines brighter than ever.

WELCOME TO LAKE LAPCAT

And now for Bowser's Fury! This is an all-new Super Mario adventure made especially for the Switch, and it's been bundled together with the re-release of Super Mario 3D World because it builds on that game as a foundation. Like 3D World built on everything that came before it! . . . Is this the new pinnacle of Super Mario? It actually very well may be!

The setting for Bowser's Fury is a happy-go-lucky set of islands spread across the feline-themed Lake Lapcat. In making my predictions for what the content of Bowser's Fury would include in our last issue, I thought that this cat-crazy environment pointed toward a return of Bowser's Cat Suit form, Meowser. I was wrong about that. Absolutely everything else is catted up instead!

All of the enemies have cat ears and tails. Kittens roam the islands in random little groups. Every bit of the environment that could be made to call cats to mind has indeed been made to do so: trees comes to two points instead of one, flowers bloom in the shape of paws and the lighthouses dotting the skyline all have ears and tails as well. It's cats all the way down.

NOT FURRY, ALL FURY

Except, again, for Bowser. He's cast aside his Cat Suit, his normal look and any other past alternate version of himself in favor of becoming a brand-new beast. He's enormous, towering over the lake. He's enraged, seething with more anger than he's ever shown in any prior game appearance. And he's out to absolutely burn Mario to ash with the hugest blasts of fire breath we've ever seen!

This insanely intimidating new take on Bowser is the centerpiece of both the story and the gameplay in this quest. Storywise, it's up to Mario to restore Bowser to his normal self – he's been evil before, but never *this* evil, so this state of affairs can't be allowed to continue. Gameplaywise, he's a constant, harassing presence. You'll hop and bop along, platforming and exploring and defeating foes under a shining sun for a few minutes at a time. But every so often the skies will darken, a rainstorm will sweep in and Fury Bowser will awaken! He'll instantly attack Mario no matter where he is or what he's doing, and it's a wild visual spectacle every single time just due to the sheer size of him!

Imagine just going about your business, walking down the street in your hometown, when suddenly – *BAM!* – Godzilla drops out of the sky and starts shooting truck-sized spikes at you. That's the dynamic here. You'll sometimes be able to play in peace, and other times Fury Bowser will antagonize you so ferociously that you'll have no choice but to deal with him.

There are three ways to respond. 1) You can do your best to ignore him, either carrying on with whatever task you were already up to when he appeared or else hiding out in a safe spot for a while – he'll eventually get tired, go back to sleep and the sun will come out again. 2) You can grab one of the 100 scattered Cat Shines – the unique collectable item of Bowser's Fury – and its blinding light will cause big bad Bowser to immediately retreat back into his shell. Or 3) you can get on his level and fight him face to face, in a colossal clash of kaiju-sized foes!

Activating that last option, though, involves a bit of prep work.

BRING BACK THE BRILLIANCE

One things our preview predictions did get right was the relationship between the Lake Lapcat lighthouses and the blackened, goop-covered, super-sized Super Bell placed to look like a sphinx. There's three of them, as it turns out, and it's up to Mario to burnish them back to a brilliant shine by relighting the similarly sludged-up lighthouses. And *that's* achieved by gathering the Cat Shines.

This is where Bowser's Fury breaks from 3D World and acts more like 64, Sunshine, Galaxy and Odyssey. (The behind-Mario's-back camera view is borrowed from them as well.) You'll approach each individual island and you'll be presented with a platforming quest to accomplish to earn a Cat Shine. There's a great variety of them. Sometimes it's just making it through an obstacle course to reach the light-house on the island. Other times you have to beat the clock in a race to a goal point, or gather five scattered Cat Shards to assemble into one full Shine. And sometimes an evil Luigi shows up and you have to bop him to make him cough one of them up!

It's a great mix of activities that never gives you a chance to feel bored – and when you've gathered enough Cat Shines to awaken one of the Giga Bells, then it's time for the main event!

CLASH OF THE TITANS

Touching a Giga Bell transforms Mario into the massive, glowing, very-much-like-a-Super Saiyan Giga Cat Mario. In this biggest and most powerful Mario form ever, you face off against Fury Bowser in direct combat. The entire scene changes as the camera pulls *waaaaay* back and the huge structures you just spent hours running and jumping across at normal size now appear to be tiny obstacles between you and the colossal King Koopa. And . . . watch out! Here he comes!

Bowser charges at you with menace and malice, spinning in his shell, screeching through the sky, showering the whole lake with spikes and firing fierce flame blasts. It feels as epic as it looks, and honestly is the most satisfying clash Mario and Bowser have ever had. It feels like a worthy upping of the ante of their rivalry after 35 years of faceoffs.

It's not just a one-and-done rumble, though. After beating Fury Bowser once, you're sized back down and more islands are made available to you to explore, so you can seek more Cat Shines, then awaken another Giga Bell, and so on. All together the quest is not a terribly long one, but it's also not over after just an hour or two either, so it strikes a nice balance.

WE'RE NOT DONE YET!

More design aspects to explain!? This "freebie" is just so packed full of fresh ideas! I'll round up the rest quickly.

Bowser Jr. assists Mario as an A.I.-controlled helper character — or you can recruit a Player 2 to take charge of him and his Clown Car. He's a valuable ally in that he can snag out-of-the-way items by freely flying around, and he can give his own minions a whack with his paintbrush to help in combat. It's not a four-person multiplayer component as in the other half of this two-in-one game package, but it's been nice to have the option to include one of my sons at a time as an assistant.

The Fury Blocks! Not too complex, but still an inspired addition. Some of the Cat Shines are only accessible after Fury Bowser blasts them apart with one of his huge fire breath attacks, forcing you to bait him into doing so using Mario's poor, burnable body! Such a smart idea to involve the big Bowser attacks in a direct way like that.

And Plessie — the Yoshi-ish Loch Ness monster character who popped up in 3D World for a handful of brief, straightforward swimming sections — is back here and made into a brilliant solution for speeding up travel around this island chain. It's so satisfying to hop on Plessie's back and just cruise around the waters here. Future open-world Mario adventures will have to take a cue from this and give our hero access to some kind of similar method of quick transportation, otherwise they're going to pale in comparison to good old Plessie happily splashing around Lake Lapcat.

THE FUTURE OF MARIO?

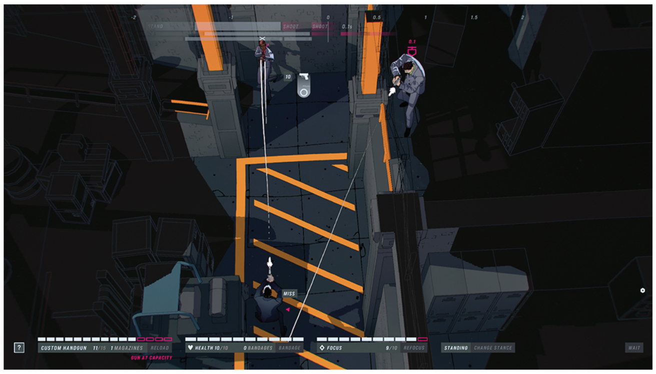
And that's where Bowser's Fury lands, in the end: leaving any longtime fan who plays it wondering if they've just seen a glimpse at the future direction of the Super Mario series. This story is over after fix or six hours. It doesn't overstay its welcome. But its structure is so spot-on perfect — having everything happen in one expansive environment that becomes more and more explorable the further you go and the more Shines you grab — that I hope this is just the beginning of a new thread being woven into the great, now-35-year-old Super Mario tapestry.

Honestly, I'm really left wanting more here. The platforming? Perfect. The visual design? No notes from me (and I'm not a cat person). The music? My goodness, the music! Each island gets its own tune, and every one of them is catchy beyond belief. I'm really hoping we get more of this.

. . . And maybe not even in the Mario series! We all know Nintendo likes to cross-pollinate creative ideas between series. I can easily envision a Zelda game in which Link is constantly menaced by one massive monster. A Pikmin sequel that doesn't segment its playable environments, but has them all linked together as one. A Metroid in which Samus can have a Player 2 pal instead of always exploring alone!

It's safe to say that Bowser's Fury has left a great impression on me. And paired with Super Mario 3D World, a game that was already a masterpiece in its own right? Like I said before, this combo package is unskippable. All Switch owners: Own this! **— LUCAS**

10



Keanu the Killer

JOHN WICK HEX

IT'S WEIRD TO think that John Wick came out in 2014. It feels so much older than that! I mean, Keanu Reeves has been an action star for several decades, and director Chad Stahelski (who has helmed the entire theatrical series so far) has been in the industry for just as long; but still! At this point John Wick is more than just a film franchise. The character is an action icon, having appeared in myriad cross-overs, even Fortnite.

Enter Mike Bithell. Wait, the developer who worked on that narrative game about shapes? Yeah. As it turns out, someone who's really good at making puzzle games can craft a pretty mean strategic framework for a mind as surgical as John Wick's.

That connection really is the key to understanding how a tactical puzzle game fits within the John Wick framework. Due in part to Reeves' impeccable stunt work, you can really see Wick map out how he tackles each situation in the films. Whether that's dealing with a certain deadly enemy first before moving on to the next, or taking out a key threat at the right time; that complex decision tree is the throughput of John Wick Hex.

While playing, I was immediately reminded of Superhot, but Hex does put its own twist on it. To sum it all up, things are all basically happening at once, but every action eats up a different chunk of time on the "timeline" at the very top of the screen. Once an action is done, the game pauses (on the default mode), then you choose again, the enemies go, and so on. You repeat that process until either you or everyone else is defeated.

One of the most low-key fascinating elements of the system is choosing when to reload. In a real-time game in the heat of the moment, knowing when to reload could mean the difference between a win and a loss. But here in Hex, it's a little different as you need to make sure that you aren't opening yourself up to an attack, or getting in a situation where you can't finish someone off.

There are a few things that can get annoying though, and are mostly a fault of the engine itself. Movement can be clunky, as you inch toward close and closer on a map even with no enemies present. Also, the "tactical" menu (which brings up commands like waiting on purpose without acting, picking up items or bandaging) is a chore sometimes, and can be finicky to aim. On Switch, there are some minor loading issues, even for things as small as tutorial tips.

Although there was a lot of hard work between Bithell and Stahelski from a collaborative standpoint, ultimately, this is a side story. Although it feels really strange saying the phrase "John Wick lore" out loud, Hex really isn't adding a whole lot to the conversation. Which is likely by design, as the film series generally keeps things close to the chest until it feels the need to bring them up in turn, as the story progresses. That said, this is authentically John Wick, in that you play a character that looks like Keanu Reeves, and you're going to be messing up a lot of digital henchmen's days.

If you want, you can jack things up even further with the "Expedited" mode, which forces you to act with a seven second upper limit timer on actions. Basically, you don't get the JRPG time freeze effect – you're toying with the active time battle (ATB) JRPG effect. It's a nice gamey-yet-thematic touch that really helps make an additional playthrough feel distinctly different. In fact, for strategy veterans, I recommend it.

Speaking of "gamey," several levels can be cheesed a bit – sometimes through no fault of your own – by taking advantage of chokepoints. On one later stage I ended up taking out a large chunk of enemies by accident. It felt cheap, but it was just a limitation of the hex-based system.

John Wick Hex doesn't feel like a licensed game, which, historically, should be a compliment. (There are exceptions, like X-Men Origins: Wolverine, which Raven Software put a lot of love into to ensure that it was better than the film). It's a flawed but fascinating addition to an excellent action film franchise. **– CHRIS**

7.5

SWITCH PUBLISHER: GAMBITIOUS DEVELOPERS: BITHELL GAMES & ANT WORKSHOP RATING: M

The Return of Ryza

ATELIER RYZA 2: LOST LEGENDS & THE SECRET FAIRY

EVER HAD A game that just won't get off your radar? For me recently, it's been Atelier Ryza 2: Lost Legends & the Secret Fairy.

This game from Koei Tecmo and Gust looked like it had all the makings of a fun JRPG, but I was hesitant. I hadn't played the game before it, 2019's Atelier Ryza: Ever Darkness & the Secret Hideout – or any previous Atelier game for that matter. If those reasons are holding you back too, forget them, because Atelier Ryza 2 is absolutely worth playing.

This game takes place three years after the first game, and the time skip makes it easier to jump into.

The sequel reintroduces you to spunky protagonist and alchemist Reisalin "Ryza" Stout, as well as her friends and what they've been up to in their time apart, so you won't feel too lost going in. That said, there were a few story and lore references that I didn't understand, but I didn't mind looking those up as I went along.

In the sequel, we find Ryza and her friends, some old and new, in a setting that's completey new: the capital city of Ashra-am Baird and the vibrant locales around it. They decide to embark on a journey to search several ruins around the city and discover lost legends deep within.

These ruins are the biggest highlight of the game and comprise the main story. Exploring them is no chore thanks to the game's beautiful visuals, which stand out both on a TV and in Handheld Mode. They have distinct settings, from an underwater temple to a volcanic cavern, and offer mysteries to investigate regarding alchemy. To solve them, you have to explore carefully (with new swimming, climbing, monster riding and grappling hook capabilities) and employ a balance of the two main gameplay elements of Atelier Ryza 2: crafting and combat.

Atelier games' biggest focus is on crafting, a.k.a. synthesis, and it was surprising to me how engaging this system is. I often lost track of time while crafting, and it never felt like a tedious task. To synthesize new items, you have to explore the world around you, gather materials and learn recipes. Each material has an element, ingredient type and quality level associated with it, and you plug in the types of ingredients that recipes call for.

Using better ingredients will increase items' quality and effectiveness. As you get further in the game, this becomes more important since you can use healing and offensive items in combat. I spent hours upgrading my weapons, armor and combat-centered items so that I could have an edge on tougher foes.

Keep in mind there are a few big difficulty spikes in this game when you're playing on anything above Easy.

The combat system involves a mix of action and turn-based elements. You control three members of the party at a time and use basic attacks to build up action points (AP). Then, you can dispense AP to use items or powerful moves that are unique to each character. It was fun using different combinations of characters in the many fights that came my way, but it took some time to understand the mechanics of combat and crafting because the game doesn't explain its systems well.

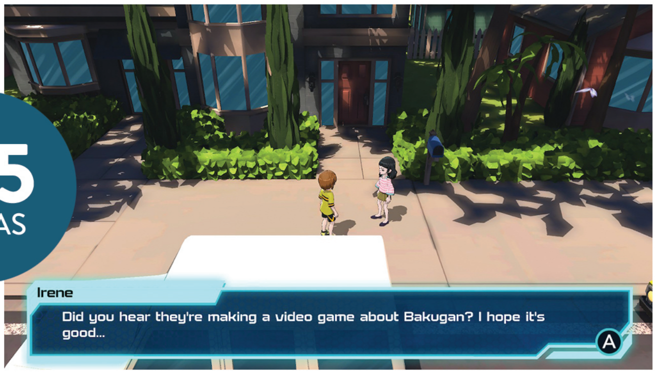
This was a recurring problem I had while playing Atelier Ryza 2. The game offers tutorials, but many of them are short and vague while the systems are complex. I had to learn a lot of the intricacies of crafting and combat through trial and error, and that led to several hours of redoing what I made at the start of the game, because I had crafted poorly.

My time with Atelier Ryza 2 was mostly well spent. Ryza charms as a lead protagonist, and her adventures in this sequel will engage your mind and your heart as you discover the lost legends and help her friends along the way. Here's hoping Ryza's journey isn't over just yet! **— MAGGIE**

8.0

SWITCH PUBLISHER: KOEI TECMO
DEVELOPER: GUST RATING: T

6.5
LUCAS



When Age Determines Expectations

BAKUGAN: CHAMPIONS OF VESTROIA

CALVIN WAS CAPTIVATED.

Last July, Nintendo teased that a surprise new game announcement would be taking place following a Treehouse Live broadcast that was mostly focused on Paper Mario: The Origami King. NOA's social media kept things cryptic, only confirming one detail about the secret title: It was being made by WayForward.

Speculation spread like wildfire. In the wake of Nintendo having loned the Zelda franchise to the indie developers who'd made Crypt of the NecroDancer, fans quickly jumped to the conclusion that some other first-party IP had been gifted to the makers of Shantae. Surely we were about to witness the reveal of an all-new Wario adventure! Or maybe a fresh Kid Icarus. Even a new Metroid!

The Origami King video presentation ended, and WayForward's game was revealed to be . . . Bakugan. The collective groan could be heard 'round the world.

But only grown-ups were groaning.

My son Calvin — not quite 6 and a half at the time — was on the edge of his seat. He was enraptured. Totally enamored at the sight of towering, titanic Bakugan beasts battling one another while teeny-tiny humans ran around underneath their feet. He'd never seen Bakugan before — none of the previous games or shows. He'd never played with any of the toys. But he was so *in* just from watching that Treehouse trailer that I knew I'd have to buy this game for him.

I didn't get it myself. Old as I am, I've seen the likes of this game tons of times before, so my expectations were low. But Calvin's response was so effusively positive that I decided I'd give the game a shot too.

On Christmas morning, 2020, my son unwrapped Bakugan: Champions of Vestroia and began his journey into an all-new world. His eyes hadn't lost any of their awe from that day in July, and he joyfully chose his first Bakugan partner, learned the game's battle system and started blazing through the story like he couldn't get enough, laughing and smiling all the way.

Later on, I took my own turn. And it was . . . fine. OK. I could see why the developers made the decisions they did, but nothing was wowing me.

And so it was that Bakugan became my clearest example yet of how the experience of playing a game can vary wildly based on the age of the player. I've tried to keep this in mind in the past, assessing games like Paw Patrol (on the next page) while keeping their target age group first and foremost in my thoughts. But the difference in expectations and experience with Bakugan in particular has been stark.

From my point of view, the battles are bland. They're Pokémon-esque in the sense that they're one-on-one fights between two monsters, each of which has access to four different moves. But rather than take a turn-based approach, WayForward went with a somewhat active battle system in which you control your human character, running around the battlefield and grabbing glowing hexagons to power up your partner monster's attacks. It's novel for the first few minutes — then tiresomely tedious.

But, again, that's only my opinion. Calvin's never complained once at how repetitive it is to run randomly around same-shaped battlefields over and over again, grabbing and chucking those power wafers and watching the same canned attack animations play out hundreds of time over. He digs it.

Elsewhere, I could take issue with the emptiness of the game world, the odd lack of music in many scenes or the trouble navigating to each next point of interest or plot-progressing NPC. But Calvin's just thrilled to have found new Bakugans for his team, or to have had one evolve to Hyper form.

So, groaning grown-ups, I wouldn't recommend this game for you. But if you've got a young gamer in your life, show them the Bakugan: Champions of Vestroia trailer video from last July, then sit back and watch their reaction. If they're shocked and awed like it's the greatest thing they've ever seen, then grab a copy of the game for them and let them enjoy it — in the way that, apparently, only kids unburdened by decades' worth of other video game memories are able to do. Calvin gives it his highest praise! **— LUCAS**

SWITCH
PUBLISHER: WARNER BROS. I.E.
DEVELOPER: WAYFORWARD
RATING: E10+

9.0
CALVIN

8.5

For Your Youngest Pups

PAW PATROL MIGHTY PUPS: SAVE ADVENTURE BAY!

THESE PUPS ARE still impressive.

Back in NF #37, I reviewed Paw Patrol: On a Roll for the Switch. With, at the time, a 4-year-old super fan of the show living in the Thomas home, I was impressed at how well the developers at Torus Games had adapted the source material. Their take on the toon was deliberately straightforward: a no-frills sidescrolling platformer that I praised because it got its target audience right. Calvin, at 4, was just beginning to get a grasp on video games, and playing a Paw Patrol adventure that only allowed him to go left or right and jump to snag Pup Treats was perfect in introducing him to the basic concepts of controlling a character on the screen, as opposed to just sitting back and observing their actions.

Well, if On a Roll was a primer for 2D platformers, then this follow-up is a tutorial for the 3D variety. Paw Patrol Mighty Pups: Save Adventure Bay! has a different developer – Drakhar Studio – and they've taken a different approach than Torus did. Though one no less impressive!

In fact, this game's even more on-target with adapting the show than its predecessor. On a Roll gave players control of just one pup at a time, and each one ran and jumped the same way, only employing their unique sets of tools at checkpoints along the way to the goal. This time, Ryder calls forth two pups to handle each mission – as he always does in the show – and you can freely switch between the two at any time. What's more, both of them have ample opportunity to employ their personal Pup Packs, as each level in which they're playable has a smattering of interactive elements that only one pup can activate. Rocky spots piles of trash and uses his tools to clean up the mess; Rubble breaks apart rocks with his pack's built-in drill. Simple, but in character for each.

Then there's the aforementioned perspective shift: Sidescrolling has been sidelined in favor of 3D exploration. It's almost entirely linear, so kids won't have to struggle with learning to control a free camera or anything like that. It's basically easygoing corridors with occasional branched paths, as well as light backtracking if the player wants to try to gather every floating Pup Treat in each level. That aspect of On the Roll was retained intact: There are hundreds of the snacks scattered everywhere, and the more you grab, the more extra content gets unlocked outside of the main missions.

I love the shift in structure. It lines up well with the timeline of Calvin's journey as a young gamer, as he's now just turned 7 and is taking his first steps into 3D platforming adventures. Getting his feet wet with low-impact, no-enemies 3D running and jumping like this is an easier introduction than, say, a fully 3D Mario quest. (Though, credit where credit's due, he's leapt into Bowser's Fury as well and is more than holding his own there.)

The Mighty Pups – the Paw Patrol's superhero alter egos – make regular appearances, and their superpowers are gameified as brief minigame sequences. Marshall melts blocks of ice with his Mighty Heat in response to repeated presses of the B Button; Skye whips up whirlwinds as the player spins the Control Stick in circles. It's fine, but I had expected a more prominent role for the superhero versions of the characters since that's the brand used on the box.

Minigames round out the package, like the famous Pup Pup Boogie! The Pups' favorite in-universe DDR clone has become a very simple rhythm game here, but it's fun to see all the same. I encountered some trouble with button presses being misread in it, though. And elsewhere throughout the game, small flaws like bits of spoken dialogue getting cut off before the whole sentence is complete pop up and point to a lack of a final round of polish on the presentation.

Still, as with On the Roll a couple of years ago, I find myself wanting to give this Paw Patrol game a lot of extra leeway, since it achieves what it set out to do – make Adventure Bay a real place to play – and it brought more smiles to my sons in the process. Ready for action, Ryder sir! **– LUCAS**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: OUTRIGHT GAMES
DEVELOPER: DRAKHAR STUDIO
RATING: E

SECOND OPINION

HYRULE WARRIORS: AGE OF CALAMITY

PREQUELS CAN BE problematic. Most of the time, I prefer the mystery. When some film or show or video game establishes a solid story, I'm most often only interested in seeing what happens next – not what came before. Darth Vader was diminished by the unveiling of his origins. Han Solo didn't need a solo film starring Not Harrison Ford. Rogue One was pretty great as a lead-in to the events of the original Star Wars, but now Disney's working on a prequel show of that prequel movie, and I'm having a hard time mustering up much hype for a series starring a character whose ultimate fate is already known.

. . . OK, OK. Star Wars is an easy target. But I feel like I can use it as an example since so many are so familiar with it, and because I'm such a fan of that galaxy far, far away.

Age of Calamity, thankfully, does things differently. As Tony noted in his review last time, this game is not the straightforward prequel story we were first led to believe it would be. Rather than it simply being a retelling of the events of the war against Calamity Ganon that took place 100 years before Link's awakening in Breath of the Wild, it is instead surprisingly a time travel tale! The little egg-shaped Guardian seen on the AoC cover art posing alongside Link, Zelda and the Champions was not originally present with them when Hyrule fell – rather, it witnessed the tragedy of their failure in the future, then traveled back to the past to warn them that they're on the path to ruin so that, hopefully, they can do things differently a second time around and avoid meeting the same terrible fate.

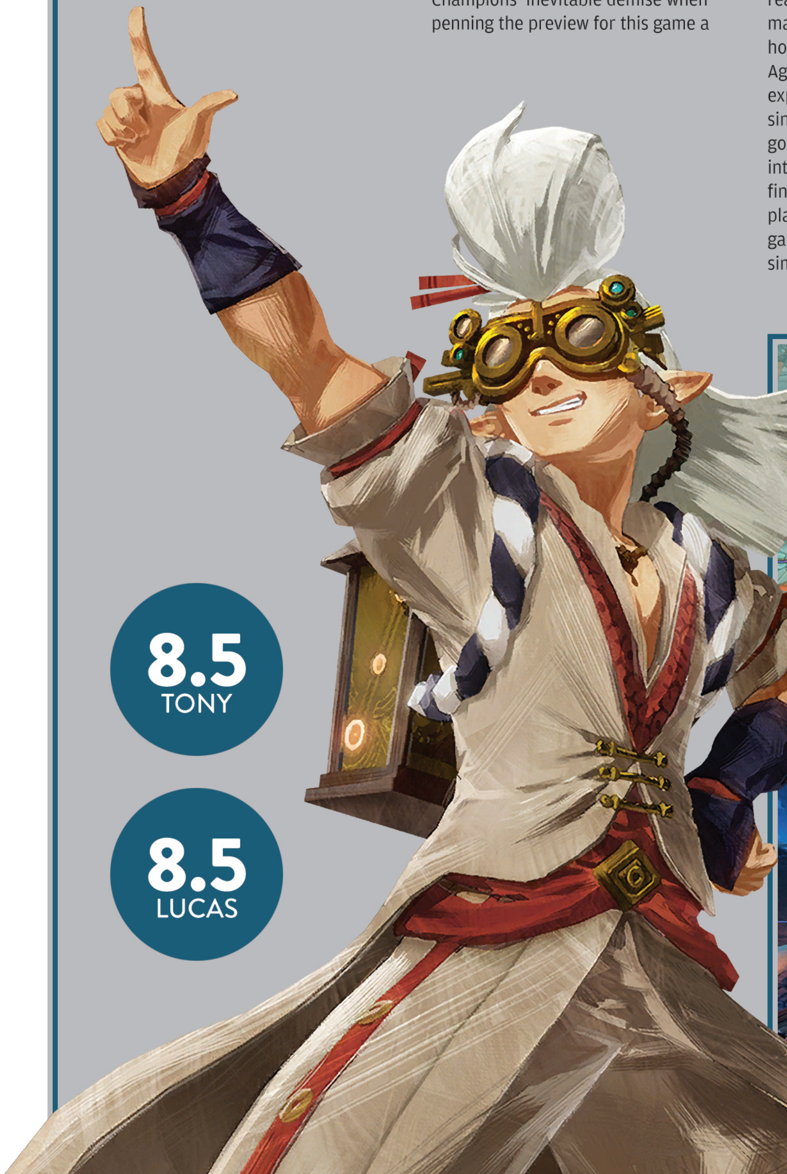
It's fascinating! I lamented the Champions' inevitable demise when penning the preview for this game a couple of issues ago, but I didn't know about this time travel curveball at the time. It increased my enjoyment immensely to know that I didn't know, necessarily, how things were going to turn out after all. I could play with my sense of anticipation intact – almost like someone figured out how to unspeak a spoiler that had already been said.

With that magical unmaking of my sense of disinterest in prequel tales established, I was able to jump into the fray of this latest Hyrule Warriors adventure with gusto. And I've had a blast! The Musou/Warriors series gameplay formula of sending you out as a lone soldier to carve your way through tens, hundreds and thousands of foes at a time is still satisfying to me – though enough time has passed since I played the older Hyrule Warriors and Fire Emblem Warriors games that I think I was ready to dive back into the button-mashing mayhem of it all again. I hope that the time I'm investing in Age of Calamity doesn't sour my experience with Persona 5 Strikers, since it's also Musou-based and is going to be the next game inserted into my Switch after this issue's finished. I feel like anyone who's played any Warriors before can likely gauge whether or not they'd feel similarly ready to get into this one.

That said, I have to give credit to all the inventive ways that Age of Calamity keeps the experience from descending into too much tedium. The great variety of playable characters is more admirable than ever, as each hero has a gameplay mechanic that is wholly their own – they're not all just cosmetically different from one another. My favorite has been Revali, as he's able to soar into the air at will and attack enemies from above! I'd hoped that he'd be able to do that, and so he can. It's hilarious to bomb Bokoblins from the sky without even stopping on your way to each next objective.

Even better? Controlling the Divine Beasts! . . . Well, for the most part. It's absolutely fun to wield their immense power, but I also had some trouble with the motion controls foisted upon those sequences, and that took me out of the moment.

I also had a bit of trouble maintaining momentum since the story is kind of scattered around the map instead of mostly linear like the earlier Hyrule Warriors, and I went for long stretches of days before jumping back in to make more progress. But perhaps that's just as well – this prequel needs to tide us over until the Breath of the Wild sequel finally arrives and lets us see what happens next! **– LUCAS**



8.5
TONY

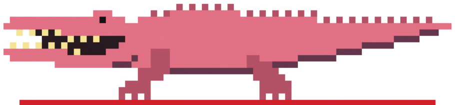
8.5
LUCAS

ARCHIVE

The complete list of Nintendo Force retail reviews from the past two years. Scores reflect individual reviewers' opinions.

SWITCH

TITLE	SCORE	REVIEWER	ISSUE
AI: The Somnium Files	8.5	Tony	#44
Animal Crossing: New Horizons	9.0	Rebecca	#46
Ary and the Secret of Seasons	6.0	Lucas	#49
Astral Chain	8.5	Jonathan	#42
Bloodstained: Ritual of the Night	7.5	Tony	#48
BurgerTime Party!	8.0	Lucas	#44
Catherine: Full Body	8.5	Jonathan	#49
Clubhouse Games: 51 Worldwide Classics	8.5	Lucas	#48
Cobra Kai: The Karate Kid Saga Continues	6.5	Kris	#50
Contra: Rogue Corps	7.0	David	#43
Crash Team Racing: Nitro-Fueled	8.0	David	#41
Crystal Crisis	9.0	Jonathan	#40
Daemon X Machina	7.0	Chris	#42
Deadly Premonition 2: A Blessing in Disguise	7.0	Jonathan	#49
Digimon Story: Cyber Sleuth – Complete Edition	8.5	Josh	#44
Dragon Quest Builders 2	9.0	Shesez	#41
Dragon Quest XI S: Echoes of an Elusive Age – Definitive Edition	9.5	Lucas	#43
Dreamworks Dragons: Dawn of New Riders	7.5	David	#39
Fire Emblem: Three Houses	9.5	Lucas	#41
Friday the 13th: The Game – Ultimate Slasher Edition	8.0	Kevin C.	#46
Ghostbusters: The Video Game Remastered	7.5	Brett	#43
Guacamelee! One-Two Punch Collection	9.0	Jonathan	#42
Heroland	7.0	Rebecca	#45
Hyrule Warriors: Age of Calamity	8.5	Tony	#50
Ice Age: Scrat's Nutty Adventure!	5.0	Chris	#45
Indivisible	7.0	Tony	#47
Kingdom Hearts: Melody of Memory	7.0	Tony	#50
Langrisser I & II	8.5	David	#46
Layton's Mystery Journey: Katrielle and the Millionaires' Conspiracy – Deluxe Edition	8.5	Brett	#45
Luigi's Mansion 3	9.0	Chris	#44
Mario & Sonic at the Olympic Games: Tokyo 2020	8.5	David	#44
Mario Kart Live: Home Circuit	9.5	Lucas	#49
Marvel Ultimate Alliance 3: The Black Order	7.0	Brett	#41
Mega Man Zero/ZX Legacy Collection	9.0	David	#45
Model Debut #nicola	7.0	Rebecca	#44
Moonlighter	8.0	Lucas	#39
Moving Out	8.0	Lucas	#47
My Time at Portia	5.5	Chris	#40
New Super Lucky's Tale	9.0	David	#44
Nickelodeon Kart Racers 2: Grand Prix	7.0	David	#50
Ni no Kuni: Wrath of the White Witch	9.0	Brett	#43
Nintendo Labo VR Kit	9.0	Lucas	#40
Paper Mario: The Origami King	8.5	Brett	#48
Pikmin 3 Deluxe	9.5	Lucas	#50
Pokémon Mystery Dungeon: Rescue Team DX	8.0	Lucas	#46
Pokémon Shield	9.0	Thor	#44
Pokémon Sword	8.0	Lucas	#44
Puyo Puyo Tetris 2	8.5	Rebecca	#50
Ring Fit Adventure	8.5	Matthew T.	#44
Rune Factory 4 Special	7.5	Rebecca	#46
Sakuna: Of Rice and Ruin	8.5	Lucas	#50
Snack World: The Dungeon Crawl – Gold	6.0	Brett	#45
Spyro Reignited Trilogy	9.0	David	#42
Star Wars Pinball	9.0	Lucas	#42
Story of Seasons: Friends of Mineral Town	7.5	Rebecca	#48
Super Dragon Ball Heroes: World Mission	6.0	Tony	#40
Super Mario 3D All-Stars	7.0	Lucas	#49
Super Mario Maker 2	10	Tony	#41
Super Monkey Ball: Banana Blitz	7.5	David	#44
Team Sonic Racing	8.5	David	#41
The Legend of Heroes: Trails of Cold Steel III	9.0	Maggie	#49
The Legend of Zelda: Link's Awakening	9.5	Jonathan	#43
The Ninja Saviors: Return of the Warriors	7.0	Jonathan	#44
The Nintendo Switch Lite	9.0	Matthew L.	#43
The Outer Worlds	8.0	Matthew L.	#47
The Sega Genesis Mini	9.0	David	#43
The Wonderful 101: Remastered	9.0	Jonathan	#47
Tokyo Mirage Sessions #FE Encore	7.5	Matthew L.	#46
Trials of Mana	8.5	Brett	#47
Trine 4: The Nightmare Prince	9.0	Lucas	#44
Wolfenstein: Youngblood	7.0	Chris	#41
Xenoblade Chronicles: Definitive Edition	10	Lucas	#48
Yooka-Laylee and the Impossible Lair	9.0	Tony	#43
Yoshi's Crafted World	7.5	Lucas	#39



3DS

TITLE	SCORE	REVIEWER	ISSUE
Etrian Odyssey Nexus	8.5	Nadia	#39
Kirby's Extra Epic Yarn	7.5	Neal	#39
Persona Q2: New Cinema Labyrinth	8.0	Matthew L.	#40
Yo-kai Watch 3	8.5	Lucas	#39

SECOND OPINION
CLUBHOUSE GAMES: 51 WORLDWIDE CLASSICS

NORMALLY WHEN YOU see a compilation of games, you can expect it to be a "jack of all trades but master of none" scenario. Just cramming multiple games into a single cartridge for the appearance of value – when only a few are worth your time – is a tactic long used in gaming. Nintendo has been guilty of it in the past, but with their Clubhouse franchise, they carefully curate. That doesn't mean that every game will hold your attention for hours – there's only so much card matching a person can handle – but every game's presentation is appealing and fun.

I didn't think too much of the tabletop games like Toy Soccer and Toy Curling at first, but ended up spending more time on them than I thought. Funnily enough, the games I found hardest to master were the simplest, like Dots and Boxes or Four-in-a-Row. My boys and I spent an unhealthy amount of time playing Blackjack, Texas Hold 'Em and Chess, and I rekindled my love for Mancala, Renegade and Mahjong. The accessibility and low learning curve means many can play. I even had my parents join in a few of these, and my wife and I can relax and play several together. Truly a whole family game.

It's also a blast discovering a new game. I had never heard of Hare and Hounds, and while it's easy to understand, the strategy of the game was interesting. Similarly, Takoyaki was a card game I hadn't played, Carrom was an awesome experience and Nine Men's Morris was surprisingly intense and strategy-laden. They can't all be winners though. I'm sure very few were excited about the Piano, Bowling is an odd choice given just how awesome Wii Bowling was in the past and Hit and Blow was just weird.

I do wish that more options for multiplayer games were available. I also wish that more could be done with a single copy of the game, but I understand that in many instances it would be hard to keep choices private when people are looking at the same screen. I'm also a bit disappointed that some games weren't expanded, like Texas Hold 'Em, Tanks, Golf, Fishing or Shooting Gallery. Some games like Mahjong, Solitaire and Hanafuda get a lot more love than a toss-away game like Slide Puzzle, and I wonder why the gamut of card games from the DS version weren't simply added here to up the total to 61 or 71 games. Some filler could be traded for a better balance of games.

Speaking of balance, I agree with Lucas that the A.I. was either a putz or a cheat.

Finally, I loved that players could unlock special Mario cards for the card games. I have the physical release of the Hanafuda and Mario playing cards, and I can't help but wonder why, with such a rich history of special cards related to the Nintendo company, more varieties couldn't be unlocked! **– BRETT**

8.5 LUCAS

8.0 BRETT

FANZINES

Recommended Reading

To dive deeper into the Suda51 subculture, check out Grasshopper Manufacture Zine!

"NOT FOR PROFIT." It's a small turn of phrase that describes some of the biggest and best things people can do, from acts of charity to creating art for art's sake. The Grasshopper Manufacture Zine applies on both fronts, and better yet, it's been a roaring success. Now two volumes deep into its lifespan, the small publishing venture is dedicated to collecting fan art, writing and even music that riffs off of the game studio's best work, with all proceeds going to philanthropic institutions like Doctors Without Borders and ModestNeeds.Org. Contributors to each book-sized issue come from far and wide, include the likes of professional game artists like Mike Lambert and Lindsay Collins, crunchy indie dev upstarts like James Cooper, actors and essayists like Andrew Piechota and freelance illustrators like Venom and Rangqui. Each issue even features a few exclusive words from Suda51 himself (though it's possible that he was the last to know that). We got to catch up with Danni and Arcade, the two enigmatic creators of this unique "Salon Analog Organization," about Suda's contact with the project, their love of all things Grasshopper, and where they're headed to next.

NF: What gave you the idea to create your own massive, book-sized Grasshopper tribute 'zine?
DANNI: I've been interested in zine culture for a long time, from old punk/queer/feminist zines to the current rise in fanzines. I didn't know of anything zine-like in the Grasshopper fandom, and I have the publishing know-how, so I thought, why not fill that niche? Arcade and I have managed a Grasshopper fanblog together on Tumblr for years, so I asked if he wanted to help out – and the rest is history.

ARCADE: Funnily enough, I only knew about zines in a really removed sense, but most of my experience with publishing actually came from being part of a small writing group in my hometown. Once a year we produce a very modest anthology of short stories and poems, and it also includes illustrations. Danni reached out to me in regards to a making a Grasshopper zine, and I figured that it would be really similar to making that old anthology. It was in a lot of ways, but really different in a lot of others.

What is it about Grasshopper Manufacture's stories and characters that inspires such amazing and personal fan art and fiction?
DANNI: There's this unique element to Grasshopper's stories and characters that just draws great work out of fans. They're so distinctive,

INTERVIEW BY JONATHAN HOLMES

whether you're looking at the complex worlds, or the iconic characters and their relationships, or even simply their overall aesthetics. They hit a personal chord with fans for any combination of those reasons. We love them so much we want more, which inspires us to create more ourselves.
ARCADE: I think it's the really intricate universes and lore found within the games that are really inspiring. The visual novels have a lot of story going on "in the background" or characters who show up for a short scene or two and then exit the game forever (or even better, show up in much later titles, like how some older Grasshopper characters show up in Travis Strikes Again – my favorite example of these is Johnson from Shadows of the *[bleep]*).

What was one of the biggest surprises that hit you while producing the 'zine?
DANNI: The interest was many times over what we'd expected for Volume 1! What we'd expected to be a small-scale fanzine quickly ballooned into a full anthology. We were ready for the demand in Volume 2, but the pandemic brought its own new set of obstacles to the project. Dealing with logistics isn't easy, but creating a snapshot of fans' love for Grasshopper AND raising money for meaningful causes makes it all worth it.
ARCADE: I'll just echo Danni in that we were utterly floored by how many people were interested in contributing content to the zine. We maybe expected about 15 people, at the very most. Imagine our shock when we got over 40! And something else that surprised us in particular was how many people remembered the really niche Grasshopper titles like Frog Minutes and Contact.

Were you worried about how Grasshopper might react to the project?
DANNI: A bit, once the project started growing! Grasshopper and Suda51 have been generally supportive, if in a removed way, which is both super flattering and a big relief. I'm still blown away every time Suda51 retweets us. Multiple fans showed him Volume 1 in person pre-pandemic; I know there are a few signed copies out there. I also know that someone on GungHo staff for Let it Die bought a copy and displayed it in the office for a time!
ARCADE: . . . It didn't even cross my mind at the time. I heard the stories of folks getting Suda51 to sign their copies, and the Let it Die folks who had their copy, and I just thought "Wow! Neat!" and not "We might get in legal trouble for this!". So, thank you Suda51 and all the lovely folks at Grasshopper for being so cool!

Any plans for future projects, Grasshopper-related or otherwise?
DANNI: Other than a possible Volume 3 in the distant future, I'd like to do a smaller-scale Grasshopper-themed zine. I'm still interested in the more lo-fi style of zines, and I think something in that vein based on Grasshopper works would be a lot of fun. I'd also like to release some zines with my original writing one day.
ARCADE: Again, I have to echo what Danni said – we had a lot of interest for certain Grasshopper titles (Kill the Past in particular) to warrant smaller zines. Volume 2 also came with a Grasshopper Manufacture EP, which was awesome. I'd love to work with more musical artists in the future to make an even bigger and better EP.

Any final words for Suda, Grasshopper, and all their fans?
DANNI: I can't thank Grasshopper and Suda enough for the ways they've inspired me. Truly, it's changed the course of my life. I'm so grateful to our talented community of GhM Zine contributors, as well as all the Grasshopper fans who've supported us. Check out the featured artists, writers and musicians from both volumes if you can, they're amazing!
ARCADE: It's an understatement to say that this incredible community has changed my life and the lives of others for the better. I'd like to thank anyone who's been involved with Grasshopper Manufacture games, and both zines: the biggest thank you, without delay.

@ghmzine

gumroad.com/ghmzine

ghmzine.carrd.co

ARTWORK BY JENNIFER HAN, VENOM, MIKE LAMBERT & LINDSAY COLLINS

8.0
FACES OF EVIL

FAN-MADE REMASTER REVIEW

Link: The Faces of Evil & Zelda: The Wand of Gamelon Remastered

The adventures of Link (and Zelda!) that Nintendo would prefer you'd forget . . . thrust back into the spotlight!

STOP ME IF you've heard this one:

Nintendo wanted to try their hand at CD-ROM multimedia in the early '90s, so they partnered with Sony to develop new hardware fit for that purpose. Out of nowhere, Nintendo kicked Sony to the curb and teamed up with Philips instead . . . then decided CDs were for the birds and severed ties with Philips as well. As part of the separation agreement, however, Nintendo gave Philips license to use their mascots in a handful of original games for Philips' own CD-i console.

And the rest is history.

These titles have morphed into top-tier Internet memes, due to their so-bad-they're-good cutscenes that have birthed many a YouTube compilation or message board image macro. Two in particular – Link: The Faces of Evil and Zelda: The Wand of Gamelon – enjoy such notoriety that lines like "I'm so hungry, I could eat an Octorok" or "I can't wait to bomb some Dodongos" are as ingrained into the Nintendo faithful's consciousness as "It's a secret to everybody" or "It's dangerous to go alone."

Ironic that we'd be so nostalgic for games most have likely never played – CD-i wasn't exactly the hottest hardware during the '90s. That's fine by Nintendo, who would rather the memories of these unwanted offspring of a failed corporate marriage be lost to time. There's also the matter of quality. Or rather lack thereof. Because these games are bad. Like, really, really, *reeeeaaaally* bad.

But don't such historical software oddities that exist by an unfortunate twist of fate deserve a revival for posterity's sake? One particular CD-i enthusiast named Dopply believed just that. Over the course of four years in Game Maker, Dopply rebuilt both from scratch, reusing the same assets but streamlining the experience with a widescreen view, speedier movement, reconfigured controls and rerecorded music. These remasters may not appear to be much different from the originals, but so much has been changed under the hood that these are now the definitive versions of the once-rare wares.

But make no mistake, they're still bad.

Released on the same day in 1993, FOE and WOG were two halves of the same coin. In the former tale, Link is whisked away to Koridai to stop Ganon from transforming the populace into beasties, while in the latter, Zelda takes up arms to save the

ORIGINAL RELEASE: CD-i; OCTOBER 10, 1993
PUBLISHER: PHILIPS INTERACTIVE MEDIA
DEVELOPER: ANIMATION MAGIC

8.5
WAND OF GAMELON

land of Gamelon after both her father and Link go missing. Credit where credit is due, as the choice to cast Zelda in the lead was a refreshingly progressive move, one that the main series has yet to emulate! (Another fun tidbit: The Princess' attire was directly modeled after her appearance in the DIC-animated Zelda cartoon. That plus the in-game cast's characterization suggest that this duology may exist within the cartoon universe!)

FOE and WOG eschew the typical top-down Zelda perspective, drawing closer comparison to The Adventure of Link's sidescrolling antics, minus its RPG elements. As the hero of the hour, you'll navigate linear levels and pick up key items, which can then be exchanged with NPCs from previous levels for new equipment and access to additional zones. Vanquish monsters with your blade, find keys to unlock doors, spend Rupees (or Rubies, as they're erroneously labeled here) in the town shop – as you do in Zelda, of course!

But the devil's in the details, and boy, have these sinners fallen afoul of heaven's grace. Backgrounds are hand-painted landscapes, though they lack clearly emphasized surfaces, so you never quite know what part of the environment is actually solid ground. Invincibility frames are nonexistent, so swarms of baddies can drain your hearts in an instant – a fate made even more dire by the fact that enemies often spawn out of thin air. And should you reach the end of a level but lack a required tool, you must either hike back to the entrance or intentionally kill yourself and allow the continue timer to expire.

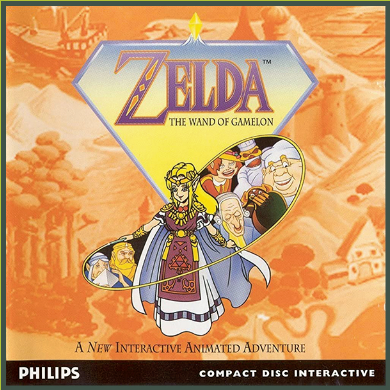
And that's in the *improved* Remastered Mode! By selecting the original game style from the main menu, you'll also be greeted by such bizarre quirks as Rubies having to be collected by stabbing them, an inventory screen accessed only by crouching and limited lives with no means of gaining more. Thankfully, Dopply's tweaks alleviate some of these nonsensical foibles – though I wish he'd gone a step further and, I dunno, made it so blowing apart boulders didn't require 10 flippin' bombs!

In the end, I can't really blame Dopply for taking pains to preserve these games' inherent jank. If you are committed to tackling this darkest of Zelda eras, you are likely expecting a glorious disaster with a smile on your face. At least both FOE and WOG are short enough – we're talking an hour and a half max on a first playthrough – that you can bask in the therapeutic madness before it has a chance to drain your spirit and warp your perception of what constitutes proper game design.

But if you *do* wish to mire in this swamp pit for a bit longer, you'll be treated to a more difficult Hero Mode and eventually a chance to play as the opposite adventure's protagonist, as well as Zelda's father, King Harkinian himself! The King is a treat indeed, running around and punching Dairas in the face – he don't need no sword to chew bubblegum and take names!

The original Faces of Evil and Wand of Gamelon may always remain a black mark on the Zelda franchise's legacy, yet I can't shower Dopply with enough praise for these remasters. He's given both old and new generations of fans the opportunity to at long last revel directly in these games' unintended humor – an experience you'll never forget no matter how hard you try. In fact, he recently announced that he's working on an *original* spiritual successor to these adventures, so expect the Zelda CD-i redemption arc to continue! **– TONY**

archive.org/details/foer-wogr-patched-12-9-20



ORIGINAL RELEASE: CD-i; OCTOBER 10, 1993
PUBLISHER: PHILIPS INTERACTIVE MEDIA
DEVELOPER: ANIMATION MAGIC

Mii MAGIC

Seeing Myself in Hyrule

Or rather, my Mii self, courtesy of one incredible hacker's skills!

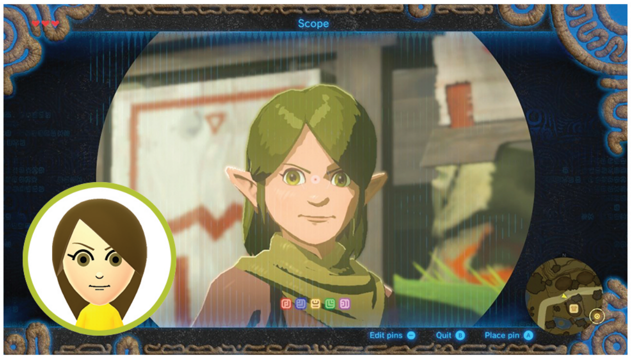
I AM STUNNED.

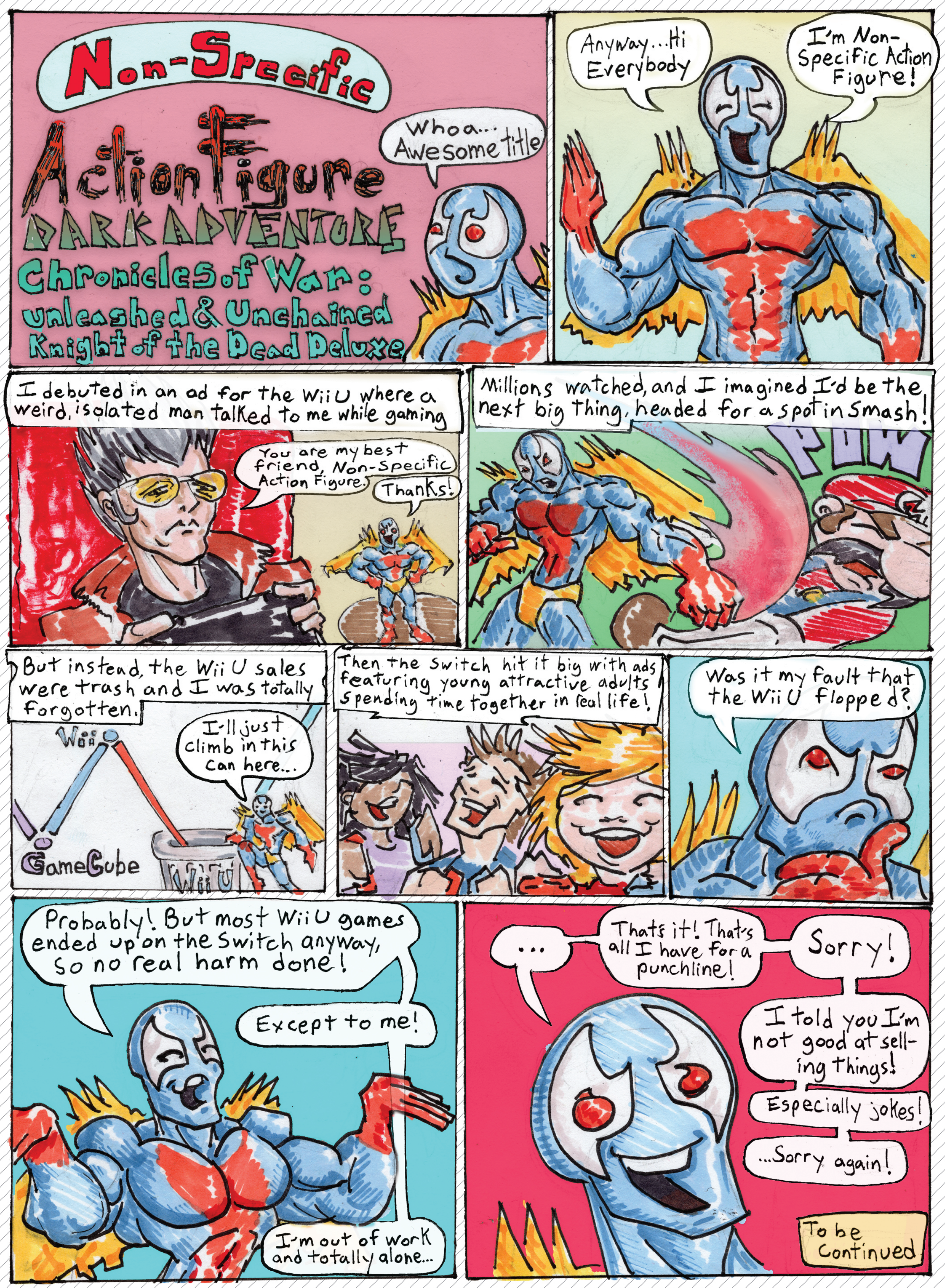
The New Year was not yet three days old when self-proclaimed "Mii expert" Alice shocked the Nintendo fandom with an incredible revelation: The NPCs in Breath of the Wild were made from Miis! The full story is more complex than that, of course, but basically Nintendo's developers streamlined populating the new open-world Hyrule by using a version of Mii Maker to assign different hairstyles and facial features to each of the many "human" characters Link encounters on his travels.

That insight alone would have been wonderful, but Alice then took things a step further by figuring out how to mod the game and use any Mii's data to bring new citizens of Hyrule into existence! Some examples seen here include the default Mii used for Super Smash Bros. Ultimate's Mii Fighter Gunners (below on the left), Matt from Wii Sports (below on the right) and, well, me (above)! I sent my personal Mii's data to Alice, and then they were able to use it to make my Mii self materialize in Rito Village. I chose that spot since I'd most want to hang out there if I happened to stumble into Hyrule for real!

Alice truly is a Mii expert, and if you'd like to see your own Mii made into a Hylian or a Sheikah, you can reach out with a commission request through Twitter at @HEYimHeroic. And then check out the robust Mii Library Alice is building as well, by going to sites.google.com/view/MiiLibrary! — **LUCAS**

@HEYimHeroic





BY JONATHAN HOLMES

NEXT ISSUE

The players of the N64 era have begged and pleaded since the end of the last millennium for **Pokémon Snap** to get a sequel, and at long last that prayer is about to be answered! The all-new **New Pokémon Snap** is set to debut on the final day of April. (But since it's less than 24 hours' difference, we're going to go ahead and let it headline the May/June edition.)

Photography will be in focus as we zoom in on the intersection between video games and cameras that the Snap experience so perfectly exposes. We're already hard at work on the issue now, and we're excited to see how it all develops!

Also coming into frame next time will be our reviews of late February releases that didn't quite make the cut this time: **Bravely Default II** and **Persona 5 Strikers.** We'll put big March releases like **Monster Hunter Rise** and **Balan Wonderworld** through their paces too, then look ahead to the future, as we always do! It'll be a great issue. Just picture it!

IN THE WORKS FOR ISSUE #52:

- **NEW POKÉMON SNAP**
- **MONSTER HUNTER RISE**
- **PERSONA 5 STRIKERS**
- **BRAVELY DEFAULT II**
- **YS IX:** MONSTRUM NOX
- **THE LEGEND OF ZELDA:** SKYWARD SWORD HD
- **MIITOPIA**
- **MARIO GOLF:** SUPER RUSH
- **PROJECT TRIANGLE STRATEGY**
- **SPLATOON 3**
- **DC SUPER HERO GIRLS:** TEEN POWER
- RETROSPECTIVE: **GAME BOY CAMERA**
- THE FATE OF **FATAL FRAME**
- INTERVIEW: **BRANDON HILL**
- AND MUCH **MORE!**

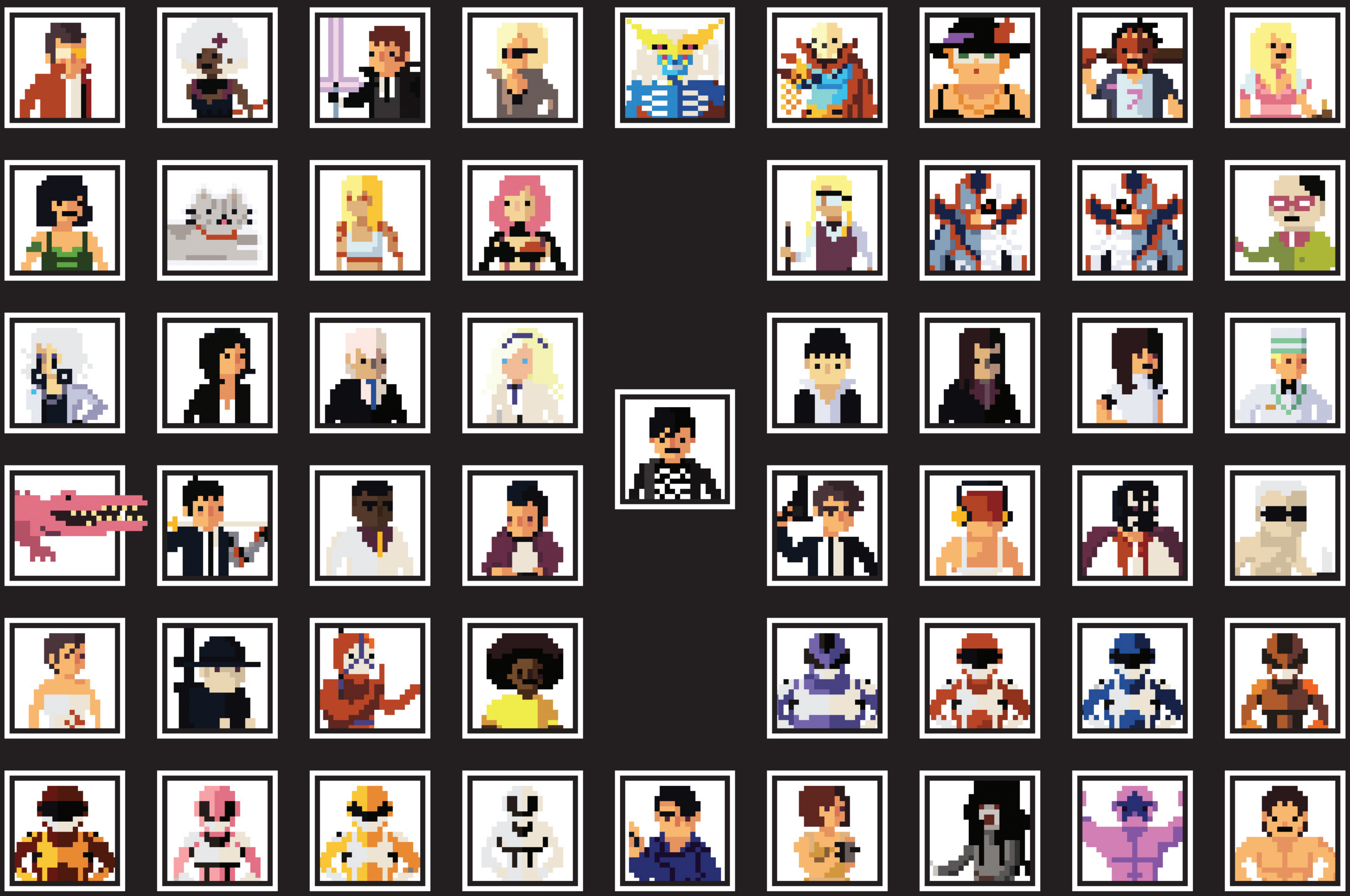
MAY/ JUNE 2021

51 FRIENDS TO FIND

WERE YOU ABLE to Count the Koopas? How about pinpointing all of the plus signs? Our double counting challenge in our last issue turned out to be pretty tricky, so please feel free to consider yourself triumphant if you were able to end up with a final total anywhere in the ballpark of our official numbers.

The total tally of Bowser images throughout the issue? **63!** Not too terribly difficult to track down all of those, hopefully. But the plus signs? Some of them were super tiny, so don't feel bad if you fell short of seeing all **295** of those! (And actually, the final count depends on whether or not you were reading the digital or the print version of the issue. Because the print copies had two extra plus signs printed on the spine, which is never visible digitally!)

To catch our breath from that pair of eye-straining activities, let's have another page-flipping visual scavenger hunt that should be a little bit easier to manage. Why? Well, we're showing you all of your targets below! Rather than having to wonder if what you're looking at counts toward the completion of the game or not, you just need to match up the characters seen here with their doubles printed somewhere else in the preceding pages. These are 49 different characters who appeared in games that Suda51 helped create, in addition to a little sprite version of Goichi Suda himself and Star Man, his favorite Pro Wrestler, to make a total of 51 friends to find. Can you track all of them down? (Extra credit for Suda51 super fans who can name all of these wildly different characters too!) Our thanks to contributing artist Pete Marshall for pixelizing each one! **— LUCAS**



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